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ICAR dishes up chapatti star wheat variety

By Chandrika Mago/TNN

New Delhi: It's all aimed at ensuring that when you sit down on that dining table, your hot chapatti is just a tad tastier, your bread and biscuit a little yummiier than what you're used to. Even if, in these modern times, you have to go slow on the ghee and butter.

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research has identified seven new wheat varieties for release. Each, they assure you, will give you better quality and tastier food. Each, they hope, will prove more productive for the farmer, keeping away pests and disease and putting more money in his pocket.

They have certainly taken their time about it. One new variety

aimed at central India is the first in seven decades to be tailored specifically for this region. In their own words, H1 1531 is the first early-maturing, semi-dwarf bread wheat variety ever evolved in the history of drought-tolerance breeding in central India. A mouthful, that. What it means is that earlier, varieties were developed elsewhere and found suitable for the central regions, says B B Singh, genetics division head at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute. Central India now gets one of its very own.

Not before time. Indians have

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been chomping on wheat, production rising from a mere 6.3 million tonnes in 1949-50 to over 70 million tonnes now. Second only, perhaps inevitably, to China. Between 1971 and 2001, 54 new varieties sprouted in fields.

H1 1531, as the name goes, will stand just under a metre tall and ensure early arrivals of "best quality" chapatti wheat in the market. Then, it's up to you.

Other regions needn't feel left out. ICAR is dishing up different varieties for each: the north-western plains, which contribute about 40% of all the country's wheat, the north-eastern zone and the peninsula.

The north-west is in search of a new star. The main actor in the northern fields right now, PBW 343, is becoming susceptible to the yellow and brown rust diseases, says Singh.

It's also vulnerable to a race of stem rust now racing across Africa—as has happened before, it is feared this disease will land on Indian shores.

So, PBW 343 may well have peaked in popularity. ICAR is ready to direct one fresher, DBW 16, into this wheat market, billing it as resistant to the crippling yellow and brown rusts, comfortable if it's sown late in the season—and yielding about 39 quintals a hectare. The search for other stars is on.