

# **BIRIS, SARAWAK'S FRAGRANCE RICE**

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## ***I*ntroduction to aromatic rice**

Aromatic rice has a special place in the market and is considered the best in quality, hence its frequent use during special occasions. It is also the most expensive rice in the world market because it is the most difficult to produce, mill, store and sustain. Aromatic rice has been popular in the Orient and is now getting more popular in the Middle East, Europe and the United States. Most of the aromatic rice and trade is from India, Pakistan and Thailand.

The most expensive aromatic rice is the famous Basmati which commands a premium and gets a price that is three times higher than high quality non-basmati types. India exported 1.1 million metric tonne of basmati rice in 2006. Basmati is a variety of long grain rice, famous for its fragrance and delicate flavour. Its name means "Queen of Fragrance" in Hindi. The price of Basmati is about US\$ 800/mt compared to the price of Thai fragrant rice which is about US\$ 650/mt.

Other important aromatic rice in the world market are jasmine from Thailand, Khao Dawk Mali 105 (Thailand), Siamati (Thailand) Bahra (Afghanistan), Sadri (Iran), Della, Texmati and Kasmati (USA).

In Malaysia, the state of Sarawak has been blessed with many aromatic rice varieties. Some of the fragrant varieties are Biris, Kanowit, Bajong, Wangi and a long list of lesser known ones. The most famous of them is Biris. Biris originates from the rice farms of Simunjan in the Kota Samarahan division. It has been grown in Simunjan for a long time and it made its debut in the early eighties when society became more affluent.

Rice markets in Sarawak are different from those in West Malaysia. In Sarawak, high quality rice is sold by the variety in the retail market. In the 1980s the Research Branch of DOA collected and evaluated many traditional high quality rice varieties that have commercial potential. This resulted in the recommendation of 3 traditional high quality varieties namely, Biris, Bario and Rotan. Seeds of these varieties were propagated and distributed to farmers in different parts of Sarawak.

The price of Biris fluctuates as it depends on the demand and supply. For instance, after the harvesting season, the price drops as there is ample supply but when the supply is small, the price increases.

Biris is sold for about RM 3.20-3.80 per kilogramme. However there are several vendors in the Sunday market who sell the pure Biris for as much as RM. 5.00 per kilogramme.

The rice farms in Simunjan mainly depend on rainwater as irrigation facilities are not available. Farms are small with areas ranging from 0.5 – 1.5 hectares in size. Farmers do not use much fertilisers as Biris is a traditional tall variety. These tall rice varieties are inherently more efficient and have the ability to make use of the soil nutrients for growth. Farmers normally apply a basal dosage of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium before transplanting. Heavy application of fertilisers, especially Nitrogen, results in increase in plant height instead of yield. This will cause the plants to lodge (fall to the ground) when the grains are formed.

Biris is classified as long grain rice according to International Grain Classification System. The plant is tall measuring about 160 cm in height and has an erect plant type. The stems are thick and strong. The panicle is long, measuring 30-31 cm. Each panicle contains about 230 grains of padi. This variety matures in 163 – 167 days from seed to seed and is photoperiod sensitive. This means that it is sensitive to day length and it can only be planted once a year from September to October.

Biris has a grain length of about 6.88 mm, width of 2.47 mm. and a length/width of 3.10 mm. Under the International Grain Classification System, Biris rice is classified as a long slender grain. Being long and fine it weighs about 22 g for 1000 grains of paddy. The milled rice of this highly preferred variety is translucent. Laboratory assessment for its fragrance showed that Biris rice is strongly aromatic.

Freshly harvested and milled Biris when cooked with the right amount of water has a very smooth texture and the grains are soft and just slightly sticky. The grains look glossy and simply appetising. Some farmers age the rice for about 6-10 months before milling. The process of aging improves the milling quality of Biris and also changes the chemical properties of the starch. The rice grains elongate after aging similar to that of Basmati rice when it is cooked. It becomes less sticky and is preferred by some consumers who like their rice fluffy. With its similarities with Basmati rice, Biris has a great potential to become more popular not just in Sarawak but in Malaysia and internationally as well. Efforts should be taken to bring Biris into the international market and to see it become a household name alongside Basmati, Jasmine and others.



Photo 1: Biris plants are tall and have erect plant type



Photo 2: A panicle of Biris rice variety



Photo 3: Seeds of Biris



Photo 4: Rice grains of Biris