



A worker sifting through to pluck the ripened strawberries

Blue skies dappled with white clouds that drifted seamlessly to unknown destinations far away, terraced fields blanketed in greenery through the rolling landscape and small houses that seemed to peek here and there ushered us to Meepilimanna. Here we inched towards the Jagro Strawberry Farms to unravel the story of strawberry cultivation in Sri Lanka.

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

Shading our eyes against the glare of the sun, we slowly perused the land before us. Rows upon rows of strawberry plants deftly positioned next to each other filled the periphery and we peered around to catch a glimpse of the ripe red berries amongst the green leaves. Leaning close, we observed a mixture of red and green berries—ripe and unripe ones—as we set about through the strawberry fields bent on tracing the growth of these succulent and much favoured berries...

Strawberry CULTIVATION

Spread across 15-16 acres, the beginnings of the Jagro Strawberry Farms could be traced to the year 2003 in Radalla. However, as the farm grew in extent, it was shifted to Meepilimanna while turning Radalla into a nursery ground where they now specialise in growing two varieties of strawberries—Tamar and Festival. Though it is hard to tell apart the two varieties, it is said by many strawberry lovers that the Festival is more crunchier than the Tamar. As such the sorting, quality assessment and the grading of the plants are carried out in the nursery at Radalla. After which the plants are brought to the Meepilimanna Farm for planting.

The most arduous task in the cultivation of strawberries is said to be the preparation of the land and the soil beds where the plants are to be cultivated. These soil beds are put together either inside a 'tunnel' on an elevated berth or outside in the fields as raised planting beds. A special fertiliser mixture, which includes coir is used in the soil beds and are covered by mulch before planting the strawberry plants in holes made in these special berths. This is to ensure that the plant does not touch the fertilizer due to its extremely sensitive nature, if the soil is too hot or moist, it would have an adverse effect on the growth of the plant. Further tubes or drip tapes buried in each bed supplies the necessary nutrients for the growth of the plants.

Growing strawberries inside a specially built tunnel was adopted by Jagro to safeguard the plants from the volatile weather conditions of Nuwara Eliya and the Farm is currently in the process of covering, step by step, the whole extent with tunnels. However, the plants located outside of the tunnels are also arrayed as such that they could be covered if necessary. Further, the fields are visited by agronomists on a regular basis to determine the condition of the plants, water and nutrient requirements.

The farm is divided into 24 blocks where the planting and harvesting are all done by hand—thus making it a labour intensive task. After planting, it takes about a month for the plant to start bearing fruit and can yield berries up to six to eight months before reaching the end of its life cycle. Harvesting is done daily where ripened berries are hand plucked

and graded as Grade 1, 2 and 3 depending on the size, colour and shape of the fruit.

Through the FIELDS

As we traversed through the fields, climbing over from one field to the next, we observed workers bent diligently and sifting through the numerous berries to find the ripened ones ready to be harvested. A bush plant, the leaves were a dark green and white flowers dotted these beds standing out amidst the darkened leaves—a tell tale sign that more berries are to be harvested in the near future.

Workers made their way through the strawberry plant beds eagerly searching for the ripened strawberries that bore an almost heart-like shape and took on a vibrant red hue. Once found they plucked the fruit and laid them carefully in plastic trays taking care not to damage or squish the delicate fruit. Then these trays were carried to the packing facility where they were sorted and packed into containers of 250g and 125g before transporting the produce to the final destination.

Further, even during transportation, Jagro takes care not to overlay the containers so as to secure the velvety skin and the scrumptiousness of the fruit.

From the FARM...

Jagro caters to both the national and international markets under the brands Strawberry Fields and Sungrown. Each of the berries are handpicked and packed and where its freshness and delectable taste will tempt any palate to savour its crunchable flavour.

Further, Jagro produces strawberry jams and toppings with these homegrown strawberries, which comes in 450grms, 300grms—jams, and 450grms and 250grms—toppings which allow strawberry lovers to enjoy the deliciousness of toppings, and jams made out of fresh strawberries.

Weaving our way yet again to the beginning of the fields, we watched the constant trickle of workers that flowed in and out of the packing house and those who went on about harvesting the strawberries without an inkling of the impact that they had on their curious visitors, who were earnestly surveying their every move. For them it might be a mundane task but for us it was an adventure into an unexplored realm.

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Through Strawberry Fields

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