

Food regulator plans to formulate quality standards for ‘exotic’ herbs

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NEW DELHI: With the use of exotic herbs such as thyme, rosemary, oregano, allspice (pimenta) and dried mint increasing in India, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) will include standards for them in its spices and herbs guidelines that are updated every few years.

“There are several such herbs and spices that are available in the Indian markets and are being used by a niche segment. Since these are being increasingly used, the food regulator has begun drafting standards for them to check their quality,” said a Union health ministry official, requesting anonymity.

“The standards for use of certain spices such as chilies, turmeric, cumin etc are updated frequently -- that could be as frequently as every two-three years. But for others that are less commonly used, it could be after a relatively longer gap,” the official said. Of the around 100 spices and herbs recognized the world over, the Spice Board of India recognizes 52 for which standards have been set and updated.

A committee has been formed to examine the global standards, with a focus on two main parameters — quality and safety. “The quality check usually includes levels of moisture, soluble ash, dirt, extraneous matter, active component. And the safety parameters also include acid, toxins etc.,” said the official.

It could take a few months before the standards are drafted and put out in the public domain for comments and suggestions. Once finalised and notified, these standards will be applicable for not just the domestic market but also imports and online sale of these items.

“There is still niche consumption of these items but since these are being used, the food regulator is supposed to have standards in place,” he said. Experts called it a positive move that needs to be followed up with capacity building. “Drafting standards is the first step but we also need to ensure that farmers are empowered to grow products that meet these standards,” said Pravesh Sharma, former managing director of the Small Farmers’ Agribusiness Consortium.