

Rice producer has taste for growth plans

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BRITAIN'S biggest producer of rice is set to take on the USA after a £20 million expansion plan has come on stream.

Rice magnate Moni Varma has vowed to continue with his plan to conquer the rice world and make his company Veetee a billion dollar giant.

A new state-of-the-art factory has been opened at the company's Rochester headquarters.

It includes an atmosphere-controlled production line with cleanliness levels equal to a hospital operation theatre.

Inside the factory, a new method of producing pre-cooked rice is run by just a handful of people. Access is strictly restricted to reduce contamination.

Mr Varma was last year's UK Asian Businessman of the Year, and was seventh in the top 10 of most powerful Asians in Britain.

Said to be worth around £45 million, he started out with a £250,000 investment in a factory in Perivale, London, with £40,000 personal savings. He moved to Medway in 1990.

The company is now Britain's biggest supplier of the rice sold in supermarket chains as well as 60 other countries under the Veetee banner and 'own brand'.

Its range of 10 different types of rice is sold to 60 countries.

Veetee produces 360 million servings a year – a third of all the supermarket rice eaten in the UK.

But Mr Varma is determined to continue development. He said: "The



RICE 'N' EASY: Moni Varma

thing that keeps me awake at night is wanting to do things in a month that would take others 10 months to do."

The UK rice market is worth £200m a year. Mr Varma wants to keep up the pressure on the opposition.

In the new factory, machines can

inspect each individual grain and test just how white it is.

Millions were spent on research and development of the new process.

He said: "It produces 6,000 meals an hour. It is cooked with steam but at a very, very high temperature.

"The minute it is cooked the meals are sealed to keep all the goodness in which is why we restrict the number of people going in there to avoid any contamination.

"The temperature is just sufficient to get the inner core hot enough to get rid of heat resistant bacteria. We are giving it a lot of heat for five seconds and that does the trick for us.

Conquering

"The amount of money we have spent on research and development is huge. The whole project cost around £20m and we spent a lot on research and development.

"I don't think it's a great risk – I think it's a challenge."

Even rises in interest rates do not worry him. He said: "I have been in business long enough, and you have got to go forward doing the best you can. What you lose on the swings you sometimes gain on the roundabouts."

After opening factories in India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Malawi, he is concentrating efforts on his UK operation and has eyes on conquering Europe and even the USA.

He said: "In the new factory, we have room for another four of five lines to come in.

"As soon as I have got this on track, I am looking to the United States and Europe."



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