

**NON-ALCOHOLIC SAVIOUR** Farmers are cashing in on by-products such as sugar and honey, which are in good demand, especially in Europe

# Neera is Sugar & Honey to Crushed Coconut Farmers

Krishnakumar.PK@timesgroup.com

**Kochi:** Coconut growers have found a new way to supplement their income at a time when the rubber sector is reeling under a prolonged price crash.

Farmers are not only cashing in on neera, the nutritious non-alcoholic drink tapped from coconut palms, but also turning their attention to its by-products such as sugar and honey, which are in good demand, particularly in Europe.

Many of the 25 coconut producers have started production of neera and associated products, ensuring a minimum income of ₹1,000 per tree a month to farmers from neera alone.

The companies have been formed by nu-

merous coconut societies, with each comprising 40 to 100 farmers, mainly in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. "We are in the process of mobilising funds for our ₹8 crore-processing plant for neera and its by-products like sugar and honey. We currently have an order for half a tonne of sugar from London and we are unable to meet it," said P Vinod Kumar, chairman of Palakkad Coconut Producers' Company in Kerala.

The company is going in for an organic certification for its sugar, which costs upward of ₹400 per kg.

"Since there is better health awareness in Europe, coconut palm

sugar is increasingly being preferred to cane sugar," he added, adding the com-



pany also plans to produce palm honey.

Even in India, coconut sugar has a niche market, according to NU Raam Mohan, who produces coconut sugar from neera taken from his coconut farm in Palladam in Tamil Nadu.

"It is 100% natural without any preservatives and it can be a healthier replacement for cane sugar. We supply our products in Chennai and Coimbatore mostly. We are talking to bakers for using it in sweets," he said.

Raam Mohan sends the product by courier to customers.

Though coconut sugar is supposed to have a low glycemic index, making it safe for diabetics, he said he is not claiming it as such since this has

not been scientifically proven yet. In a move to aid the coconut farmers who are entering the production of neera and its by-products, the Coconut Development Board and State Bank of Travancore have jointly introduced kalpakashree debit cards.

Apart from withdrawal from ATMs and use in retail points, the card enables farmers to avail themselves of agriculture loans from the bank.

"We are planning to apply for cards for all our 1,000 neera producing farmers. They can take loans for our new processing facility and the repayment can be adjusted from the sales of neera," Vinod Kumar said.

The companies have formed a consortium for marketing various products.