

Neera: Changes afoot or chasing pipe dreams?

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Neera is considered as a nutritious health drink. Photo: Manorama

A year ago, when the state government sanctioned the commercial production and distribution of Neera, it opened up a window of hope to Kerala's coconut growers. As ambitious the project was, it was bound to bring back the lost sheen in coconut farming.

True to the claims of Coconut Development Board, Neera kiosks reported brisk sales wherever it was set up. However, the supply is far short of demand and more than half of Kerala's population haven't tasted Neera yet.

While not discounting the vast potential for marketing the product in various forms, the government has to go over the existing plans on Neera production in state to directly benefit the farmers.

Currently, the production licences are unevenly distributed due to the varied growth of coconut trees in different regions. Owing to topographical and geographical reasons, the coconut trees grow less in numbers in coastal areas compared to eastern parts of the state such as Palakkad.



A neera kiosk at Mobility Hub in Vyttila, Kochi. Photo: Josekutty Panackal

Nevertheless, the major hurdle before Neera production is a less definitive one – the lack of skilled workers. Farmers fail to fall in line with the project due to unavailability of skilled Neera tappers.

Although a lucrative business that promises fair remuneration for all those who are involved, no one is willing to take up the job of a tapper, mostly due to lack of knowledge and interest in it. Though tappers are earning a monthly income of about Rs 30000 each on an average, the number of expert hands is dwindling. The coconut farmers are now relying solely on tappers, who are at the job by tradition.

To address the issue, around 20 companies gathered together to form a consortium and started a training programme for freshers in the field.

Meanwhile, the coconut producers' are wary of the trend among Kerala youth to turn away from their vocation after completing the free trainings. "There are precedents of various government departments incurring huge losses when freshers quit the profession after getting trained," Sachidanandan, Chairman of Kodungallur Coconut Producer Company, said.

Hence, the coconut producers wanted signed assurance from youths to remain in the job after getting trained. But that became a deterrent to many who wanted to opt for the training programme. The coconut producers are now planning to train migrant labourers as Neera tappers.

As the training and recruitment is still in the pipeline, the problem still persists and is enough to impede the production.

While that remains unresolved, reports of adding sugar and complaints of fermentation have supposedly dented the image of Neera, which is touted as a pure health drink. However, the coconut producers' company rubbished the reports and insisted that Neera has always been a popular drink and its unavailability is the only hitch.

According to Sunny George, Chairman, Tejaswini Coconut Farmers Producer Company, the extract itself is incredibly sweet and there is no need to add sugar. However, as different companies adopt different methods of extracting the sap, there could be slight differences in the taste.

While some follow methods developed by Central Tuber Crops Research Institute (CTCRI), which use ice boxes atop trees and cold storage on the ground, other companies adopt know-how prescribed by SCMS Institute of Bioscience and Biotechnology in Kochi and CDB, which are mainly based on using anti ferments. Hence, the colour, texture and taste may vary.

The coconut producers' company complain that the state government has lost the heat and hence, the commitment. The financial aid promised by the government and earmarked in the budget never materialised. The state had an outlay of Rs 15 crore allocated for training Neera technicians.

However, the fund got lapsed by a tussle between the Excise and the Agriculture Department. Had that fund been allocated and enough personnel were employed, it would have been a different picture by now, the coconut producers believe.

A government Neera producing company under Kerala Coconut Producers Corporation is undergoing a similar plight. It was rendered defunct after a brief period of functioning but revived again under agriculture minister K.P. Mohanan's initiative.

Now that a sum of Rs 12 crore has been allotted, the coconut producers have revived their hopes on Neera production.

“If the government continues to show apathy towards this highly potential agro-based industry, none will come to save the God's own country.” Joji M. Thakadi of Palakkad Coconut Producers Company said.

Neera, a nutritious health drink

Components in neera	Components in carbonated soft drinks
Protein	Artificial sweetener aspartame, acesulfame-K and saccharin
Minerals	Caffeine
Carbohydrates	Acids
Calcium	Carbon dioxide
Phosphorous	Sodium benzoate
Iron	Sulphur dioxide
Thiamine	Inorganic sodium.
Riboflavin	(Excessive consumption of inorganic sodium thickens and stiffens arteries, leading to stroke, cardiac failure, high blood pressure and many other diseases.)
Nicotinic acid	
Ascorbic acid	

Major chemical components in neera and common carbonated soft drinks. Graphics: A.S. Vinod.

A colorless and odourless sap, Neera is extracted from the spathe of coconut tree and is pasteurised and preserved by adding bio-preservatives. The drink is rich in sugars, minerals, vitamins and is low in Glycemic Index (GI). GI is a measure that indicates the extent of sugar absorbed into blood. Neera also contains acids such as nicotinic acid (vitamin B3 and Vitamin PP), ascorbic acid (vitamin C). It is highly prone to natural fermentation and turns into toddy with 4% alcohol.

Neera is processed and preserved with the help of technological assistance provided by agencies such as Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) and Defence Food Research Laboratory (DFRL). With a PH value under five, treated neera can be preserved up to two months in room temperature.

Besides, there are several value added products obtained from neera, which are considered as highly nutritious. Honey sugar syrup, wine, jaggery, molasses, vinegar and so on produced from neera are delicious and high in calorific value.