

NEERA COULD BE A TRIAL TOO

Quality Concerns Owing To Low Shelf-Life And Convincing Farmers About The Market Would Be Challenging

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The state government has ambitious plans to market Neera from November 1 onwards, with an initial production of 1,500 litre per day and extending it to all districts within three months. But the government faces a huge challenge in terms of maintaining the quality of the product, training Neera tappers the art of extracting the sap from the bud, and convincing around four lakh coconut farmers about the sustainability of Neera based economy.

Currently there are six research institutions – Coconut development board institute of technology, SCMS institute of biotechnology, Kerala Agriculture University, Central Plantation Crops Research Institute (CPCRI), Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) and Defence Food Research Laboratory (DFRL) – claim to have developed Neera processing technology. They have come up with samples of fresh and natural Neera, which need to be consumed immediately. Once bottled it has a shelf life of three to six months.

While some research agencies add preservatives to increase shelf life, others claim that they use organic methods to stop fermentation, so that Neera does not get converted into sour toddy. "The challenge is to maintain the quality of Neera, while selling it at affordable prices," said Ashok Kumar Thekkan, managing director of Kerafed, an apex body of coconut farming co-operatives.

Unlike traditional toddy tapping, Neera is tapped from the coconut bud through a catheter which falls into a pouch that needs to be kept in an ice box atop the coconut tree at a temperature below four degree Celsius.

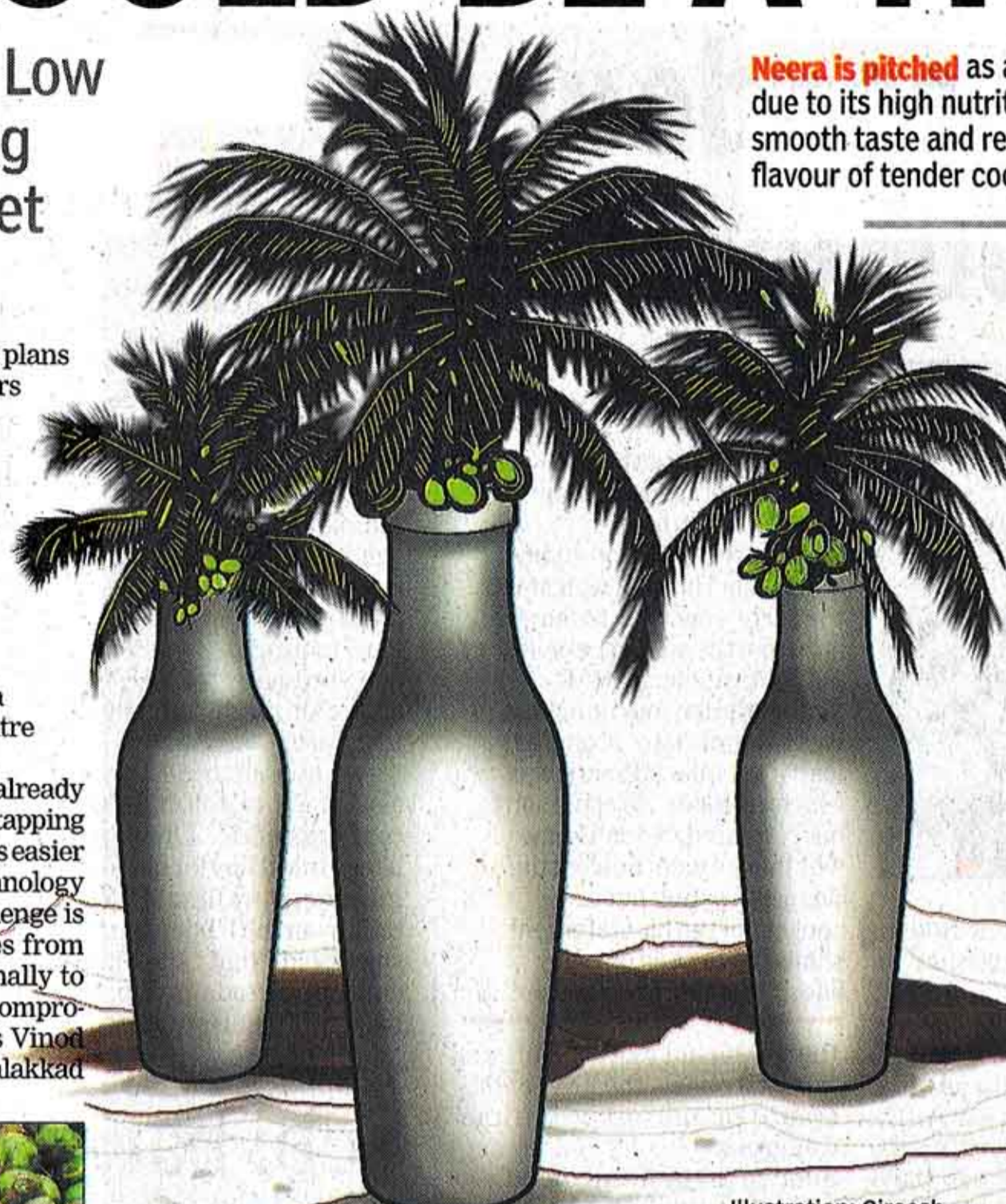
He said that Kerafed plans to train 400 Neera tappers in the coming months when the production increase exponentially. "We will increase the production only phase by phase after looking at the response of the market. The pilot plant at Elathur would be replaced by a bigger plant of 10,000 litre capacity," he said.

But experts who are already in the business of Neera tapping and selling say that this is easier said than done. "The technology is available but the challenge is to connect the linkages from farmer to tapper and finally to the consumer without compromising on quality," says Vinod Kumar P, chairman of Palakkad

Coconut Producer Company Ltd, the largest supplier of Neera in the state.

Currently, on an average, a farmer who gives 10 coconut trees for Neera production can earn Rs 25,000 a month. "The coconut farmer is taking a huge risk when he shifts from his traditional coconut based products like oil, toddy, and copra to Neera. He should be adequately compensated," Vinod Kumar said.

"There are lakhs of coconut trees in the state waiting to be tapped and we have good technology too. But the question is how can we bring the product to the market on a commercial basis and at the same time not compromise on the quality," said T K Jose chairman, Coconut Development Board.



Neera is pitched as a health drink due to its high nutritive value, smooth taste and retaining the flavour of tender coconut

Experts point out that popularity of Neera may reduce the popularity of beer among youngsters, especially during summer days

A tree can be tapped for a maximum of six months a year

Neera gets fermented very fast at room temperature and it becomes toddy with around 4% alcohol

NEERA'S NUTRITIONAL COMPOSITION

Total solids (g/100 ml)	15.2-19.7
pH	3.9-4.7
Specific gravity	1.058-1.077
Total sugars (g/100 ml)	14.40
Reducing sugars (g/100 ml)	5.58
Total reducing sugars (g/100 ml)	9.85
Total ash (g/100 ml)	0.11-0.41
Citric acid (g/100 ml)	0.50
Alcohol in	% nil
Iron (g/100 ml)	0.15
Phosphorus (g/100 ml)	7.59
Ascorbic acid (mg/100 ml)	16-30
Total protein (g/100 ml)	0.23-0.32

Annual coconut production in Kerala*

T'puram - 572 | Kollam - 427 | Pathanamthitta - 137 | Alappuzha - 219 | Kottayam - 149 | Idukki - 95 | Ernakulam - 241 | Thrissur - 608 | Palakkad - 493 | Malappuram - 947 | Kozhikode - 852 | Wayanad - 48 | Kannur - 645 | Kasaragod - 508

*in million nuts

Illustration: Gireesh

Coconut capital already on a high

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Kozhikode: Neera has already evoked a good business response in Kozhikode, the coconut capital of the state. Three companies in the district are busy setting up Neera factories, which will have a combined capacity to churn out around 30,000 litres of the non-alcoholic beverage a day.

As a sign of the new found excitement in the sector over Neera, farmers in the district have pooled around Rs 4.35 crore as share capital for setting up the Neera processing factories under the coconut producer companies in Koyilandy, Kuttiyady and Kozhikode. All the three companies have purchased land and works are underway for setting up the processing facilities.

Kozhikode accounts for around 15% of the total area under coconut farming in the state, with around 1.28 lakh hectares of coconut cultivation.

"The buzz around Neera has helped turnaround the once crisis-ridden coconut sector. Traditional coconut farmers in the district who clung on the crop even when the prices fell below Rs 5 per



nut are now very upbeat and are in the forefront hopping on to the Neera bandwagon," chairman of Kuttiyady coconut farmers' producer company, Babu M said. "We managed to collect Rs 3.25 crore as share capital from around 13,000 farmers under the 520 farmer societies, with each farmer chipping in Rs 2,500 for a share in the company. The work of the 10,000 litre per day Neera processing plant is underway and we expect to roll out commercial scale production in January," he added.

He said that 18 of the 27 federations

under the company have received license to tap Neera from around 27,000 trees. The company has started trial tapping of Neera and is planning to set up kiosks in Vadakara and Koyilandy soon.

"Apart from the expected monthly income from Neera of around Rs 1,500 per palm, coconut farmers are expected to get higher prices of Rs 40 per kg of coconut once the Neera companies start production in the state," he said adding that their factory alone would need 20,000 nuts per day for producing various value added products.

Coconut producer companies have already demanded that the government to raise the number of trees that can be tapped for Neera under each federation. At present the limit is set at 1,500 trees.

"We don't have any concerns regarding marketability of Neera, as we are already flooded with enquiries including from abroad for our various value added products," said chairman of Koyilandy coconut farmers producers company, Kabeer Vayappurath.

Even the farmers are enthused at the upbeat market sentiments kicked in by Neera.