

Neera-Anobscure Wholesome Soft Drink

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Introduction:

The world is reverting back to its natural way of living due to reduced lifespan and increased health consciousness among the people. All the way through modernization alias westernization we have lost track of our traditional Indian alcoholic beverages like toddy-palm drink from Andhra Pradesh, Apong-rice beer from Assam, Handia-from Jharkhand, Lugdi-Himachal Pradesh, Thatikallu-Kerala, Feni-Goa tribals, Mahua-Madhya Pradesh, Kiad Um-Meghalaya, Kesarkasthuri-Royal drink from Rajasthan, and Araq-from Ladakh. These drinks were less harmful in contrast to today's western beverages which are a threat to human health. One of the forgotten non-fermented beverage rich in nutrients is 'Neera', a swadeshi summer drink extracted from wild palm tree-*Phoenixsylvestris*, which is primarily used to reduce body temperatures in summer. It is a rich source of vitamin C, amino acids and various other nutrients and is clinically proven that it is better than mineral water and has less calorific value. This palm nectar is widely consumed in India, Sri Lanka, Africa, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Myanmar countries.

What is Neera?

Neera is a sweet, translucent white nutritious summer drink which is extracted from palm trees before sunrise. This drink should be extracted before sunrise because it tends to natural fermentation after sunrise at ambient temperature and converts to Toddy, an alcoholic beverage with 4% ABV (Alcohol by Volume).

How it is prepared?



Neera extraction doesn't require routine crushing process like sugarcane to extract juice. Instead, tender most spathes (large bract enclosing inflorescence) just below the crown of palm tree or other palm species are sliced using knife and a container or earthen pots are fastened to collect the sap. While collecting the sap during early morning hours before sunrise the liquid is collected from earthen pots. Usually it is consumed before sunrise because it will get alcoholised at ambient room temperatures of day or it can be stored using preservatives or any other heat preservation techniques like pasteurization or it can be refrigerated to avoid enzymatic reactions and arrest microbial growth. Various research institutes have developed technologies to process and preserve natural form of Neera and to retain the vitamins, sugar, and other nutrients beneficial for health. CPCRI has successfully developed a machine for easy extraction and collection of neera.

SCMS Institute of Bio Sciences and Biotechnology, Cochin, India in collaboration with Coconut Development Board have successfully developed filtration and preservation techniques for Neera to commercialize the drink among the public. A special filtration technique has been developed to enhance the shelf life of neera by National Chemical Laboratory in Pune and Central Food Technological Research Institute in Mysore, India came up with technology for the preservation and processing of Neera for up to 45 days in refrigerated conditions. In the state of Andhra Pradesh the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) is promoting 'neera', as a health drink, in order to help uplift the depressed toddy-tappers economically. The central government is trying its hand in developing neera clusters under the scheme of Fund for Regeneration of Traditional Industries (SFURTI) which in a way also increases employment opportunities for toddy tappers. The Gramodyog Sangh helps those who tap the palm trees by undertaking training programmes to improve neera collection and preservation and is a company which has under its fold 50 co-operative societies or institutions and is implemented by the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC). Apart from increasing the availability of the drink, the Neera cluster aims at generating more employment for tappers

Nutri-richness:

Nutritional composition depends on variety of factors namely, place, type of palm, mode and season of its collection. Neera is a wholesome drink with rich nutritional composition of sucrose, vitamin C, amino acids and acids like ascorbic acid (one form of

vitamin C), nicotinic acid (vitamin B3 and vitamin PP) and riboflavin (vitamin B2) along with Na, K, P, Mn, Cu, Zn and Fe.

Derivatives of Neera:

- ✚ **Palm syrup:** If fresh neera is heated and concentrated into syrup it will become palm syrup which is a wealth and fitness drink which is used in ayurvedam.
- ✚ **Palm wine:**Neera starts fermenting soon after collection due to pores in container and changing temperature and becomes alcoholic with 4% alcohol and is called Toddy or Kallu. It should be consumed within a day as it becomes acidic and sour the day after.
- ✚ **Palm Jaggery:**It is a solid or semisolid substance which is a ready to eat product and it has got wide use as sweetening agent in Indian village products. Sap is heated in a large pan in a recipe similar to cane jaggery.
- ✚ **Palm sugar and candy:** Palm sugar and candy are prepared from palm gur with or without clarification in a way of similar to palm jaggery and is used as sweetener.
- ✚ **Palm honey:**It is liquid syrup similar to honey used for table purpose and is a rich source of iron and is used in pharmaceutical industry.
- ✚ **Palm vinegar:**Palm sap is closed with a neat netted cloth or any other light textured cloth in a ventilated room for ten days and then the palm vinegar will be ready which can be used in food industry as preservative and in pickles.
- ✚ **Molasses:** A sweet syrupy liquid which in turn can be used to make cattle feed, golden syrup, and bio-chemical products like ethyl alcohol, acetic acid, citric acid etc.

Conclusion:

Neera is a traditional heat reducing summer drink from a range of palm trees which is sweet and is diabetic friendly. If it is properly preserved and stored then it can be commercialized on a large scale and can act as a replacement to modern chemical filled so called beverages which are harmful to health and can improve the economic situation of rural toddy tappers and preserve nation's cultural heritage.