

Camel milk for breakfast, anyone?

By MUCHIRI GITONGA

Camel milk and its by-products are slowly taking up space on the shelves of Nairobi's supermarkets.

A local firm, Vital Camel Milk, has broken new ground by setting up a plant to process camel milk – a move that could hold the economic key to hundreds of pastoralists in the arid and semi-arid districts of northern Kenya.

Though used mostly by pastoral communities, camel milk consumption is yet to assume commercial proportions. It is estimated that there are only one million camels in the country.

But the man behind the company, Mr Holger Marbach, believes the country has unrivalled potential to produce hygienic and high quality camel milk for local use and the global market.

It is this belief that drove Mr Marbach and his business partner, Dr Mario Younan, both Germans, to sink more than Sh40 million in the camel milk processing plant in Nanyuki's industrial area.

Mr Marbach says the company has invested about Sh27 million of the capital in training herds-men in hygienic milk handling and herd management.

A further Sh10 million went into setting up the plant.

"We have to keep on changing some machines and sometimes devising our own because our approach is very different from the way cow milk is handled. We have to keep on researching," says Mr Marbach, the managing director.

Pastoral communities have welcomed the development which could form a substantial revenue base for them.

Youth Affairs Minister Dr Mohammed Kuti says camel milk could get a big market following the entry of the processor.

Milk production in Kenya is mainly limited to cattle, with the dairy herd contributing 60 per cent of the total production.

Kenya Dairy Board managing director Machira



Gichohi says production of camel milk in the country is not easily quantifiable since it is not formalised.

"The volumes are very low and the production is not viable," he explained. He said milk from cows form 98 per cent of the country's milk production.

Mr Marbach says his company has the capacity to handle 6,000 litres per day from selected herders who have to adhere to strict hygienic and herd management standards.

A camel keeper gets an average of Sh42 for a litre of camel milk. The company has ventured into value addition on its products and is currently producing organic ice-creams with natural sugar and yoghurt.

It was also developing a special ice-cream that would be targeted at the Somali community as it has the flavour of a coffee variant that is popular with its members.

The company is not only marketing camel milk as an alternative for cow milk, but as organic food with medicinal properties that treats a wide range of diseases.

The company's main marketing line is that

camels feed exclusively on diverse vegetation in virgin savannah — far from pollution that characterises urban centres.

"The animals browse more than 200 different plant species that make camel milk a unique organic product," says the director.

A local natural health food company, HealthyU 2000 is distributing the milk in Nakumatt Supermarket outlets at Yaya and Sarit Centres and Dagoretti Corner.

Other outlets include Double Supermarket in Spring Valley, Shell Petrol station convenience stores' Hurlingham and Lavington branches. A litre of camel milk, packaged in a sealed translucent plastic bottle, is attracting a wholesale price of Sh180 a litre and Sh90 for half-litre. It has a shelf life of ten days.

The bulk of the commodity is consumed in Eastleigh where there a large Somali population. Here the milk retails at slightly lower prices.

Little has been invested in the production of camel milk in the country. Much of the commodity is sold informally under dubious hygienic conditions.

Supported by United Kingdom's department for international development (DfID) and Germany technical co-operation (GTZ), Mr Marbach says Vital Camel Milk Ltd is committed to fair producer prices and just social standards.

Since the factory was commissioned in July last year the number of its employees has grown to 15.

The Kenya Bureau of Standards is currently working with the company to establish camel milk handling standards. Although the company established some standards based on those existing for cow milk, Mr Marbach argues the commodity is very different.

"It is our philosophy to establish a brand name for top quality products from camel milk. We want Kenya to be the leading country in

these standards...Exporting the commodity must start with setting standards as there is no where else in the world you find quality camel milk," says the director.

He cites the United Arab Emirates where camel milk sold to consumers is blended and comprises only ten per cent of the final product.

Though well known among the pastoralists, Mr Marbach admits camel milk will not be easy to sell to other Kenyans due to attitudes to the animal.

The immediate challenge is however in milk collection. Transportation of milk is one huge logistic problem for the company with its single refrigerated truck. The milk has to get to the factory fast. It has thus confined its operations to some ten selected herders within Laikipia district where there is better pasture.

But it wants to stretch its operations to Isiolo's Kula Mawe area, some 200 kilometres from Nanyuki. The company plans to out-source milk collection to selected individuals who would be sub-contracted to collect milk privately within their home regions.

It has invested in training trainers to ensure proper management of herds. It recently employed a veterinary doctor, specialised in camel treatment. There are extension officers training herders in detecting *mastitis* which is common among camels.

Mr Marbach envisions northern Kenya herders preferring camels to cattle and goats due to their hardiness. Because of their feeding habits, the animals are said to environment friendly unlike the already over-stocked cattle and goats.

The camel is renowned for its survival even in the face of severe drought as the one ravaging the country at the moment. And with the Kenya's rain-dependant dairy industry experiencing fluctuations in production, camel milk could be crucial in bridging the deficit.

(mgitonga@nation.co.ke)

HARDY STUFF: Yet another camel milk delivery arrives at the Sh40 million factory in Nanyuki town. Inset: the finished product. Photos/MARTIN TELEWA

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