

Milking the benefits: Kenya's new camel dairy

East Africa is home to 60 per cent of the world's camel population, and the popularity of camel products in Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia has rapidly increased in recent years, with milk not just consumed by pastoralists but being increasingly sold in urban areas. However, camel milk processing has generally been done informally and, with camel production areas often located far from markets, delays in milk delivery reduce milk quality. Storage in unhygienic containers, pooling of milk from different suppliers, and adulteration of the milk with water also increase the potential contamination and spoilage of milk. But it seems that a new commercial enterprise is offering a solution. A recent addition to supermarket shelves is Vital Camel Milk - pasteurised camel milk sold in half litre packs, with a ten-day guaranteed shelf-life.



credit:Eric Kadenge:

Camel farmers living in the vast arid and semi arid areas of Kenya are steadily abandoning the practice of supplying milk to vendors, instead opting to supply to the factory - Camel Dairy Milk Limited - based in Nanyuki town, established in 2005. Local camel farmers are excited that the new factory could expand trade in camel products and cut out brokers who, they claim, buy the milk at low prices, and sell it at inflated prices.

Cow or camel milk: medicinal values

Besides the Somalis who consume camel rather than cow milk, many new consumers are eager to try the sweetness of camel milk, which is highly nutritious and believed to have medicinal value for some common ailments. Camel milk - it is believed - offers a preventive cushion over peptic ulcers. It provides an alternative for those allergic to cow milk, and it is three times richer than cow's milk in Vitamin C. It is also rich in iron, non saturated fatty acids and Vitamin B. Camel milk has anti-bacterial components that suppress bacteria and pathogens from inducing disease, and could be the solution to increased incidences of diabetes in Kenya. According to Mario Younan, Executive Director of Camel Dairy Milk Limited, and a vet who has worked with camels for many years, studies from India and Dubai indicate that regular intake of camel milk helps to control blood sugar levels. To validate medicinal claims and clarify the role of camel milk in reducing diabetes and coronary heart disease, the company hopes to partner with the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI).

The company is also hoping to expand its coverage into the North-Eastern Province (NEP) where there is a larger population of camels, though the factory was constructed in Nanyuki because it has a relatively good infrastructure and

availability of clean water for milk processing. Farmers with large herds in Nanyuki have arranged to ferry their daily milk output to the factory using bicycles, pick-ups, and trucks. But they still face other problems with milk production.

Grazing at a price

Fatuma Mohammed Abdi is one such farmer who supplies milk to the factory, getting twice the price she once did by selling milk to local vendors. But, she says, farmers are faced with exorbitant costs by ranchers who own the grazing fields. With her herd of over 100 camels scattered in different ranches within the area, Fatuma pays a monthly bill of over Kshs. 20,000 (\$278). To reduce costs, Fatuma has been keen to consolidate the herd but the ranch owners will not allow more than 50 camels on their land. Fatuma is saddened by the reluctance of ranchers to let her put her entire herd together, forcing her to divide the animals in three different ranches with the milk producing herd kept some 15 kilometers from the factory.



credit: Eric Kadenge

However, the Dairy does provide support to the camel herders, to improve animal husbandry and production. Drugs are made available at reduced rates to treat diseases, including trypanosomosis and ring worm. Salt licks are also provided, which is a vital but expensive food supplement for camels. And, to ensure milk hygiene and food safety, the company has begun a training project to sensitise farmers on improved handling to produce uncontaminated milk. In addition to providing stainless metallic cans - which can be cleaned easily - soft tissues are provided to farmers for washing the teats with warm water before milking.

Camel Dairy Milk Limited, currently the only company of its kind, is now eyeing export markets for its products. Products have been expanded to include pasteurised milk, ice cream, and fermented milk, which is particularly popular with Somalis. With the proceeds from increased sales, Mario Younan hopes that the company will be able to increase milk supplied to the dairy by establishing cooling plants in rural areas. He says the camels produce up to six litres of milk each day, fetching roughly double the price obtained from cow's milk. With more farmers looking to supply the dairy, he looks forward to expanding the market to other countries in eastern Africa, including Tanzania, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia, which has the world's largest camel population.

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