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## Is it a fruit or a nut?

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Is it a fruit or a nut? Whatever, it buoys us!

**BUSINESS & LEISURE** By Ray Butch Gamboa

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Looks like we're slightly recovering from whatever hit us. Peso is almost back to where it had lingered long enough (P43 to a \$), though this gives our exporters cause to be jittery again. At P45, they were comfortable enough to announce officially that they were alright at this level, hoping it would move up a bit more, closer to P48. I can only guess that this gives them another round of sleepless nights, but the situation is so volatile everyone is hard put to make predictions. The exporters' woes are the importers' gain as they raked up shipments upon shipments of goods when the peso got steadily stronger against the dollar, while the exporters waited it out, even during peak season.

For the coconut industry, exports rose slightly for the first half of the year. It seems we are only now recovering from the devastating typhoons of 2006 — from 713,000 metric tons; we now have 929,000 metric tons. Last year, our coconut oil export was only in the level of 119,000 metric tons. This year, we are already hitting more than 250,000 as of June.

The bullish market, I guess, is due largely to the global food requirement, but what excites the coconut industry now is the potentially unlimited application of coconut. It is now the new material in the manufacture of products for industrial use, for cosmetics, personal care, flour, etc. The high-end products of coconut include coco sap sugar which they claim is safe for use even by diabetics as it does not raise the blood sugar level. The coconut farmers of Misamis Oriental have been organized by the Philippine Coconut Administration (PCA) to produce this in commercial quantities. The coco flour is their answer to the rising costs of wheat flour and is derived from the waste material we call "sapal". This is the coconut meat usually discarded after the coconut milk has been extracted, and is now an important by-product of virgin coconut milk producers. Dried and ground finely like flour, it is mixed with the more expensive wheat flour in making pan de sal. It is fiber-rich, protein-rich, and costs P10/k less than wheat flour.

In the thick of manufacturing and exporting another coconut derivative called oleo chemicals is Chemrez Technologies Inc., a publicly-listed local company. As the term implied, they use natural vegetable oils like coconut, soya, palm oil and soy bean oil to produce chemicals for consumer products. How safe is that! No wonder the health-conscious Westerners are now looking this way for their consumer products.

Coconut oil is now used for paint products, specifically for resin (which is needed for the paint to stick to the walls) and colorants. In the face of all the toxic materials they keep discovering in every little product we use everyday, this must be a breath of fresh air for manufacturers of cosmetics and personal care products, specifically. It is available all year-round, and comes really cheap. All we need to do is tap the much-touted Filipino talents in the technical field and ensure efficient coconut production. There is a steady market overseas for high-value high-tech products. I wholly agree with Chemrez COO, the youthful Jun Lao who says that technical innovation will give us an edge overseas.

Did you know that for the first quarter of 2008, Chemrez had a neat profit of P96 million, and they expect nothing less than this for the second quarter? They estimate their turn-over for the next five years to be P12 billion, with a profit-target of P600-700 million/year.

As far as the coco exports go, I learned that about 80 percent of our coconut products is slated for export, leaving only about 20 percent for local consumption (mostly for cooking oil). Yes, we are still the biggest exporter of coconut products, serving roughly 60 percent of the world's requirement. Right now, it is still in the top ten of the country's merchandise exports, though it used to pride itself as among the top 5.

The bad news is, Indonesia has overtaken us in terms of coconut production, 16 billion versus the Philippines' 14 billion. So, even if we are still the world's No. 1 exporter, we cannot lull ourselves to complacency.

What really ails the coconut industry to have fallen back so much in production? Experts say it is poor soil nutrition and aging trees, basically. We have to re-plant, period. The other problem is land conversion. When copra prices dove to precarious levels (as low as P2/kilo) in 2000 farmers opted to sell their land for industrial uses, severely contracting the land planted to coconut.

What the Philippine Coconut Administration did was to create an incentive program for the farmers — as much as P30/mature seedling. For fertilization, they have come up with a novel, efficient and cheap way to fertilize — ordinary table (rock) salt. This is sprinkled around the tree trunk (I don't remember how big the radius is). The result is doubled or even tripled nut yield yearly.

The next Coconut Festival is scheduled on Aug. 7-10 at the Mega Trade Hall. Certainly worth a visit, not only for our local

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farmers but entrepreneurs, technocrats and exporters as well.

Memories....and more

This one is from Mon Yadao, in his mid-forties and "tubong-Pasig".

"My childhood memories wouldn't be complete without Christmas shopping in Cubao. The highlight of the evening would be the animatronic show at the second-floor ledge of C.O.D. (ang babaw ano?) But to us kids back then, seeing these life-size figures almost mimic human movements was a thrill.

This was after a tiring afternoon of trying on Gregg, Valentino, Custombuilt and other brand names (back then anyway) shoes of the day. But., we always went back to Gregg for its indestructible quality.

Merienda in Cubao was also a treat: hotdog-on-a-stick at kiosks at strategic corners in the Araneta Center. But the adults would always gravitate to Ma Mon Luk."

Thanks Mon. Yes, C.O.D. was a big part of our Christmas season, a highlight in fact, and seeing it fade to oblivion now to give way to the humungous malls that eat away a little from our treasure trove of memories. Collateral damage-it's a steep price to pay for progress.

You have childhood memories of food, games, celebrities, restaurants, stores, and other places? Share these by writing them to us.

Mabuhay!!! Be proud to be a Filipino.

<http://www.hellowild.com/imagenes/coconut.jpg>

<http://www.philstar.com/archives.php?&aid=2008072520&type=2&>

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