

Lashings of Nelli Juice: Jaffna's Inimitable Nectar of Life

Jaffna is a world of its own. A kaleidoscope of history, language, and religion intertwined with an industrious ethic that sets apart this northern jaunt. Among its unique inventions, the Jaffna Nelli Crush, made from the Indian Gooseberry, is a testament to a beginning and a story that didn't let a wild fruit go to waste.



The flagship of Tholagatty Products - the Nelli Crush in different volumes.

It's screaming green. A luster crisscrosses between the neon and rich green, offering plenty of presence and visibility. It has the lightness and energy of spring. It may be deceptive to look like the Chartreuse liqueur green. Still, it's a blend of the classic malachite, the bright and exciting harlequin, and the psychedelic neon green. A tad of it in a glass of ice cubes and water makes it a high-energy beverage that quells the thirst. It's a drink devoid of the pseudo concoctions popping abundantly on shelves. This green squash spurs the senses with

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a delightful taste that's not over the top. Its brilliance is nuanced by an enigma and simplicity of origin. For many decades now, through seasons of change, the Jaffna Nelli Crush from the gardens of the Rosarian Congregation retains the fruit's goodness to give an authentic feel to a northern invention.

Save for the novice and not-so-well-versed, everyone knows the vivacity of Jaffna, a profoundly rich and intriguing social tapestry celebrated for its repository of many local delights. Their food and crafts are products wrought from local, natural environments, the Jaffna Nelli Crush being a testament. No wonder visiting Jaffna is a journey of a thousand miles that one is bound to fall in love with. Among the many quirky things, visitors to Jaffna carry a list of must-buy items for consumption and gifting. The Jaffna Nelli Crush is top on the list.

Now for some basics. Of the two varieties of Indian Gooseberry, the Jaffna Nelli Crush is made from the round greenish-yellow variety. Known as "Beheth Nelli" in Sinhala and "Topu Nelli" in Tamil, it has a distinct taste of bitter and sweet, pungent and astringent.

Even with its not-so-great-delectability, the Indian Gooseberry is the prima-donna of this story. In 1928, Jaffna native Father B A Thomas was called to set up a Contemplative Order in Sri Lanka. That mission birthed the famous Jaffna beverage, probably the last thing on his mind as he set out on the crusade to find a place to set up the Order.

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The first Mother House of the Rosarian Congregation was established in Tholagatty, Jaffna, in 1928. In the arid precincts of the monastery grew Nelli trees with abundant fruit. According to Father Leonis, the garden had various fruit trees, even an apple tree, the first fruit of which was gifted to the Jaffna Bishop.

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The arrival of monks from India in 1929 was game-changing as it set the stage for creating Jaffna's much-loved beverage. How the monastery's fruits ended up in juices is also a refreshing narration. Being a Cloistered Order, the resident monks barely mingled in public. Naturally, they were far removed from worldly affairs. Their community was built on prayer, hard work, thrift, and simplicity. And so, they cultivated the land for food. In the meantime, the fruit trees were glowing with an abundant harvest that didn't go to waste. The industrious clergymen turned them into fresh juices served to the monastery's visitors. If not for the presence of the Indian priests who graciously shared the Nelli juice recipe, the fruits in their thousands may have gone to waste. Thanks to their home-grown knowledge, these hitherto austere fruits were whipped into a history-making juice for visitors. One can only imagine what the taste of this "homemade" juice must have been like. Probably its newness marveled the natives, who found the drink divinely refreshing in the scorching heat of Jaffna. Soon word went out about this mystic beverage that people were pining to taste. But in those days of "true to life" existence, the monks at the monastery displayed a committed work ethic to perform even the simplest of tasks with great dedication. So, pulverizing hard Nelli fruits in a mortar was the only way to squeeze out the abstract from the pulp.

By 1935, the monastery's Nelli juice had a reputation. It was becoming a regional specialty, a must-try drink from Jaffna. With that enigmatic Jaffna feel boosting its image further, there were constant inquiries from the distant south and the Jaffna buffs everywhere. In response, the monks, who had mastered the art of preparing and preserving the juice, began selling them to people visiting the monastery.

Meanwhile, the priests were overwhelmed by the persuasions of traders eager to sell the beverage in Jaffna shops to satisfy the demand for a random and obscure yet resoundingly popular drink. A few selected shops in Jaffna and the south debuted the classic beverage after 1935. Its attraction was inimitable. Something was alluring about this one-of-a-kind beverage that seemed to be prepared mystically, a kind of visual poetry and a small taste of life in Jaffna.

Today, Tholagatty Products is a registered brand located at a centralized production facility at the congregation's Achchuvveli monastery. Call it luck or a blessing, even outside its fruiting season from December to March, the monastery's Nelli trees are never out of season. That allows the monks to make the beverage throughout the year, a quantity of about 200,000 to 300,000 bottles.

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Since 2018, the manufacturing process has been mechanized. The labor of love that went into mincing the fruit by hand may have been replaced with machines. Still, the unbridled commitment to retaining its authentic taste remains intact. The fruits in their entirety with the seed are pulverized, from which the white sap is extracted. The pulp is subsequently discarded. The fresh juice extract is nothing close to the neonish green in the glass, a pastel white that is transformed with color. A period of sedimentation, ranging between three to six months with a permitted preservative, produces a brown nectar. The brown nectar would be the best juice, unadulterated, but who'd want a brown Jaffna Nelli Crush?

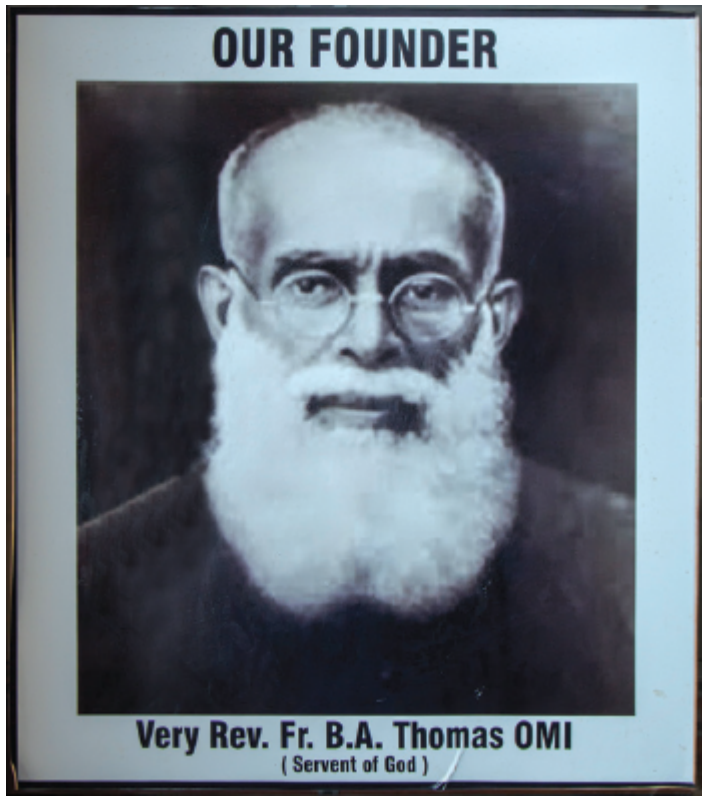
According to Father Leonis, attempts to sell the raw brown Nelli crush hadn't gone well with consumers because Nelli crush from Jaffna is synonymous with taste and color. So it remains that dazzling green to this day. Hence its final preparation includes boiling in water and glucose and the finishing touch of adding edible color.

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While the Jaffna Nelli Crush is one of a kind, timeless drink from Jaffna, its goodness is more the reason why it's worth a drink. Ayurveda loves this fruit. So much so that Ayurveda mentions it in ancient texts. To the rural folk, the tree is sacred as it washes away sin. It ought to be sacred, given its health benefits. People would stop buying market-based nutritional supplements if they knew that Nelli's rich vitamin C content makes it a healthy superfood. It's an elixir that stimulates circulation and digestion. Even if one finds it excruciating nibbling the fruit, the Jaffna Nelli Crush from Tholagatty has it all. It's exhilarating as a chilled drink. One could stretch the imagination to churn out a Nelli faluda, a smoothie, or ice cream or add it to any gormandized mishmash.

The new production facility is no longer in its birthplace of Tholagatty, a move brought about by the conflict. However, its name and taste endure. The priests, with the help of the laity, continue to spin the magical Indian Gooseberry juice from their monastery in Achchuveli. It's still a terrific drink that's an ode to Jaffna's sounds, smells, and tastes. Where the fruits burst forth in luxurious abundance to spin a quintessentially local brew that has stood the test of time.

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In 1928, Father B A Thomas set up a Contemplative Order in Sri Lanka.

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Arid Jaffna's soil is an ideal ground for the growth of the Indian Gooseberry - Nelli trees at the Rosarian monastery.

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The Congregation's farm is also home to grape vines and pomegranates that add to the repertoire of Tholagatty Products.

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A large furnace below provides the heat for the cauldron in which the fermented Nelli juice is boiled.

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The boiling process is closely monitored for temperature and constantly stirred to ensure equal transfer of heat.

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The fruits of labor being tasted by Fr. Francis.

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Technology has taken over some of the functions at the monastery's production facility such as filling the bottles with the finished juice.

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Ready to be sealed.

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All set for the shelf to the home - finished bottles of Nell Crush waiting to be distributed to shops.

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Entrance to the Rosarian Congregation's monastery now located at Achcuveli, Jaffna.



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Fr. Francis, the Director of Tholagatty Products.



Fr. Leonis, the former director at Tholagatty Products now resides at the Temple Road monastery.

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A lustrous green crisscrossing between the neon and rich green – the Rosarian Congregation's inimitable Nelli Crush of fame.



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There's more to the juices - Tholagatty Products include an affordable array of healthy juices, including grape and pomegranate, apart from the unique Nelli Crush.