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Mexico Seeks to Protect Heritage as Birthplace of Vanilla

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Mexico is pushing to protect its heritage as the cradle of vanilla, even though the country accounts for only about 1% of global production. In May 2005, the government's copyright office, the Instituto Mexicano para la Propiedad Industrial (IMPI), took the first step toward protecting vanilla beans grown in the northern region of Veracruz state and adjacent areas of Puebla state. The IMPI created a special norm for Vainilla de Papantla, named after the region in Veracruz where vanilla is thought to have originated.

The IMPI has asked the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) to push for the special designation to be recognized globally. Vainilla de Papantla, said the IMPI, was developed by the Totonaca Indians, who made a special effort to protect genetic diversity and use agricultural practices that contributed to the special aspects of the vanilla beans.

Special designation sought for Vainilla de Papantla

The proposal to extend global protection to Vainilla de Papantla is endorsed by other agencies like the Comision Nacional para el Conocimiento y el Uso de la Biodiversidad (CONABIO). "The idea is to protect what is ours," said CONABIO coordinator Jose Sarukhan Kermez. "Certain products like vanilla originated in Mexico but are now produced in many countries.

The Vainilla de Papantla designation would give our product additional value." The IMPI said special climate conditions during the winter in the highlands of northern Veracruz give Vainilla de Papantla a special flavor not found in other varieties of vanilla. The flavor has been described by various food experts as "softer, sweeter, creamier, fresher, more aromatic, more delicate," said the IMPI.

Some food-industry executives agree that Mexican vanilla has a special spicy characteristic reminiscent of cloves and nutmeg. "Mexican vanilla has its special points, and it is a quality vanilla," said Craig Nielsen, an executive with Nielsen Massey Vanillas in Illinois. Nielsen says, however, that the flavor of Mexican vanilla can be reproduced in other global varieties if cured properly. The IMPI's move to create a special protection for Mexican vanilla represents a renaissance for the industry, which went dormant during the 1950s with the discovery of oil in Veracruz and the expansion of the more profitable cattle and citrus industries. While Mexico was deemphasizing vanilla production, production of the crop was exploding in Africa and Asia. Mexico at present accounts for less than 1% of global production of vanilla beans, ranking 10th behind countries like Madagascar, Uganda, China, and India. "It's a shame because it is a 100% Mexican product," said Alfredo Lopez, sales director at Gaya Vai-Mex, a Veracruz-based processor that makes vanilla extract and Xanath, a vanilla liqueur. "Vanilla is originally from Mexico."

Some Mexican vanilla producers would like the Mexican government to go further and ban production of artificial vanilla substitutes. "They are displacing the natural extract that is produced.
in our region," said Crispin Perez Garcia, president of the Asociacion de Productores de Vainilla. Veracruz farmers face uncertain market Farmers in northern Veracruz and adjacent areas of Puebla began returning to vanilla production in the mid-1980s, but the biggest expansion occurred around 2000, following a sharp increase in global prices.

That price surge was the result in large measure of several years of drought and other weather-related problems in Madagascar, which now supplies more than half the vanilla produced in the world. Prices increased as high as about US$200 per kg in the aftermath of the drought in Madagascar, which encouraged farmers in Veracruz to significantly expand their plantings. "They planted thousands of new vines; some even took out loans to finance their investment," said a special report in the Mexico City English-language newspaper The Herald. "Local and international buyers, looking to bring down prices, encouraged the planting spree, promising to purchase the future harvests."

A later recovery in Madagascar's production has caused prices to plunge at a time when many of the vines that were planted four years ago have begun to bear fruit. Additionally, the high prices forced many food processors to substitute cheap artificial vanilla in their products, which significantly reduced demand and further contributed to the price erosion, said Nielsen. In the midst of the weather problems in Madagascar four years ago, Mexican producers were able to obtain about 500 pesos (US$47.80) per kg of vanilla.

Now farmers can only get about one-tenth of that price. "Some farmers are now accepting 30 pesos per kg for their harvest," local producer Edy Solis Carrillo told the Veracruz-based newspaper Criterios. Other producers are simply destroying their crop rather than accept low prices. "Some of those [who started growing vanilla] will take a machete and chop down their vines," said Vai-Mex's Lopez. ""Why? Because they can find another way to make a living. They can plant chiles. They can plant oranges. They can pretty much grow any other type of crop."

The decision of many farmers to opt out of vanilla production is coupled with the prospect of reduced output this year because of weather-related problems and pests. Mexican vanilla growers are also hampered by a lack of access to the latest technology, said Isabel Engler, coordinator of the Consejo Veracruzano de la Vainilla. Veracruz government tries to support producers Some officials are concerned that the plunge in global prices could derail Mexico's efforts to reclaim its vanilla-production heritage.

Veracruz Gov. Fidel Herrera has mobilized resources to provide direct support to vanilla growers in six municipalities in northern Veracruz. Additionally, the state is looking at long-term solutions such as implementing an innovative system of irrigation and improving seed quality, said Roman Brito Gomez, director of the Instituto Veracruzano de Desarrollo Rural (INVERDER).

Engler and other officials say the viability of the Veracruz vanilla industry is also important to help Mexico compete in global markets. Most of Mexico’s vanilla is produced for the export market and only a small percentage is consumed at home. Mexico has managed to diversify its export destinations in recent years, increasing sales to Europe. Germany, which accounted for about US $907 million in Mexican sales in 2004, surpassed the US as the top market for vanilla that year.
Total sales to the US, Germany, France, and other destinations reached US$1.6 million in 2004. This compares with US$623,000 in 2000, most of which went to the US.

Even with the expansion of its vanilla production, Mexico appears unlikely to catch its competitors. Mexico on average has produced 30 to 40 metric tons of vanilla in recent years, compared with about 1,000 MT for Madagascar. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Jan. 31, reported at 10.45 pesos per US$1.00] (Sources: Instituto Mexicano de Propiedad Industrial, www.impi.gob.mx; Universidad de Veracruz, www.uv.mx; El Universal, 05/23/05; Reforma, 05/17/05, 11/13/05, 12/28/05; El Dictamen, 01/22/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/24/06; Criterios, 01/27/06]

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