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THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS

January 22, 2005 Saturday
SECOND EDITION

SECTION: TEXAS LIVING; Pg. 1E

LENGTH: 2920 words

HEADLINE: vanilla The Mexican city of Papantla built its history on vanilla. It hopes to build a better future on it, too.

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DATELINE: PAPANTLA, Mexico

BODY:

PAPANTLA, Mexico - The scent, at once sweet, musky and familiar, filters in through the open car windows. Around a sharp curve, its source comes into view. Here, the sun warms hundreds of slender brown pods laid out on mats on the ground. The aroma is so heavy it eclipses the other senses.

It drifts through the nose and into the mind, whipping up memories along the way: warm cookies, homemade ice cream, crème brûlée -

Vanilla!

It's the essence that Aztec warriors used to flavor their chocolate and that enchanted Europe after the great empire's conquest by the Spanish.

This farm is in the mountains of Papantla, the Veracruz city once legendary for its vast vanilla production, and thought to be the birthplace of vanilla.

Most of us know vanilla only as that little brown bottle with a label that reads "vanilla extract." But that extract - if it's not synthetic - begins as an orchid, a pale yellow flower. When fertilized, it produces long green pods; when ripe, these are cured to produce the familiar scent and flavor.

For several days in December, vanilla lore and religious fervor come together in Papantla. By law, the official sale of vanilla beans begins each year on Dec. 10, just two days before the Catholic feast of the Virgen de Guadalupe.

Papantla, the city once said to have perfumed the world with the aroma of vanilla, is a changed place. Where farmers could once be found sorting mounds of green vanilla, one

is more likely to see Internet cafés where schoolgirls send love messages through cyberspace.

"Papantla is known for three things," says Victor Vallejo, the farmer whose vanilla is being cured in the sun today. It's known for its ancient ruins called El Tajín; for the traditional Totonac performers called voladores, or fliers; "and for vanilla," he says.

But a dramatic drop in the city's vanilla production has changed that, he says.

"It seems that 33 percent of our identity has been missing because there has been no vanilla," says Mr. Vallejo.

"It's the search for that identity that has compelled me to come up with different production methods," he says, methods that will produce more vanilla in less time.

Vanilla has been cultivated in Papantla at least since the early 1500s, when the Totonac tribe, the first people believed to farm vanilla, used the beans to pay tribute to their stronger neighbors, the Aztecs.

In the 19th century, Papantla and the surrounding region produced some 600 tons of cured vanilla beans a year. By the middle of the last century, as consumer demand for vanilla increased, Papantla's production slowed to a trickle. That's because other vanilla markets had opened up around the world, and Mexican farmers were finding easier ways to make a living.

Now, though, conditions are such that Papantla could regain its place in the vanilla world, and farmers large and small are relying on new technology to achieve this goal.

Today, vanilla is coveted as an ingredient in everything from desserts to soft drinks, from candles to cigars. It retains its romance, attributed through the years with curative, as well as erotic, powers.

Besides the unique composition of Papantla's soil, the region gets occasional cold snaps in winter - which other vanilla-producing countries don't have. This makes the flavor different from that of other vanillas, says Mr. Vallejo.

Giant food manufacturers routinely visit Papantla, seeking farmers who can supply large amounts of vanilla. But the success of the growers depends on the world market's willingness to pay a consistently fair price for the product. And that price fluctuates wildly from year to year.

If Mexican farmers could meet this demand, they would reclaim a sense of pride and a piece of their collective soul. "We could be the biggest producer in vanilla again," says Mr. Vallejo.

Growing the orchid

The heart of Papantla is its cathedral and the adjacent park. In the park, men get their shoes shined, children play and lovers stroll in the cool evening air. Here, too, vendors sell a few arts and crafts made from vanilla beans. A rosary woven from thin brown strips of vanilla will set you back about \$12, and a figure of a peasant girl or boy a few inches tall will cost about \$20.

Several hotels and restaurants cater to tourists. One can order fresh shrimp, marinated fish dishes and enchiladas huastecas - tortillas dipped in chile sauce and folded over.

But vanilla, the city's claim to fame, is not to be found in the local cooking; it's just too expensive. Even the vanilla-flavored pancake syrup at a local restaurant has no real vanilla in it.

In another ironic twist, the man who is most vocal about Mexico's vanilla production is not native to Papantla. Mr. Vallejo, 71, was born and raised in Mexico City. But he has been farming and ranching in Papantla for 40 years, and many of his employees are Totonacs.

In the last 14 years he has educated himself about everything vanilla and has almost 20 acres of orchid plants. He speaks at vanilla gatherings with the fervor of a romantic and recently finished a two-year stint as head of the Veracruz Vanilla Council.

With his silver mustache, straw hat and crisp, pale-green shirt, he is the epitome of the gentleman farmer. He often gives visitors a tour of his farm just outside the city. Today, these include an Italian couple who just opened a restaurant near Papantla; they listen attentively as he expounds on the history of vanilla with the expertise of a college professor.

There are more than 100 species of vanilla orchids, but just a few are used to produce vanilla. The one that grows in Veracruz and neighboring states is *Vanilla planifolia*.

On the surface, the vanilla plant's needs seem simple. It needs a tree, or "tutor," for support; a shallow layer of nutrients; water; and sun.

But growing vanilla requires time and effort; the flowers must be pollinated by hand. Left to mature on its own, it takes about three years for the plants to flower and an additional eight to nine months for the pods to ripen after pollination. While there's a species of bee that will pollinate the flowers, only pollinating by hand ensures fertilization of the flowers.

In the first half of the last century, peasants successfully farmed vanilla in the mountains and traveled to Papantla to sell it. "We were the most important people in the vanilla world," Mr. Vallejo says.

But by the early 1940s, Mexico's oil behemoth, Petroleos Mexicanos, began to exploit oil deposits in the area. This coincided with the rise of citrus, banana and coffee farming and the clearing of land for cattle ranches, says Mr. Vallejo.

Other countries - including Madagascar, Indonesia and Tahiti - began developing vanilla exports and were soon producing more than Mexico. Additionally, synthetic vanilla flavors were easy to make and inexpensive to purchase.

Mexican vanilla farmers found easier ways to make a living.

But in 2000, cyclones wiped out about a third of the vanilla crop in Madagascar, the world's biggest producer, opening the market for Mexican vanilla once again.

So, in the past three years, Mr. Vallejo and the vanilla council have been helping Mexican farmers start vanilla crops anew. There are now about 2,000 producers in Papantla, most of them small farmers, Mr. Vallejo says. And the area used to cultivate vanilla has increased at least sevenfold, he says.

Another farm

The vanilla fervor has reached the outskirts of the Papantla region, where, once, nearly every farmer had at least a small patch of vanilla among his crops.

A two-hour car ride from the city, half of it a bone-jarring trek over rock-strewn dirt roads, lies the town of Zozocolco. Barefoot women in colorful dresses and men in traditional tunics and pants fare better than motorized vehicles.

In the thick woods around the village are tiny farms where, with the help of government loans, peasants are once again cultivating small patches of vanilla. Some have been helped by the vanilla council.

On a hillside, Alejandro García Rodríguez tends 300 vanilla plants on about a half-acre - a tiny fraction of the plants nurtured by people such as Mr. Vallejo. This is Mr. Rodríguez's first harvest, and he is curing the beans himself.

Mr. Rodríguez, 35, is a high school teacher with a master's degree in agronomy. He has adopted new technology - making his own compost, creating retaining walls, setting up an irrigation system. But unlike those who hedge their bets by planting other things, he has put all his resources into vanilla.

"I have no money left for anything else," he says. "If this harvest is successful, I may try to plant something else. There are many other things to plant; what I lack is money.

"At this point, it's not about having a lot of plants but seeing if I can keep these going," he says.

New methods

Inside one of Mr. Vallejo's innovative greenhouses is the pungent smell of wet soil. Fat green vines with dense leaves climb the trunks of the pichoco trees, which local farmers have found provide a good guide for the vine.

Unlike farmers before them, however, they don't allow the vine to climb freely. They keep the trees pruned and the vines looping down and then up again.

What is most new about this greenhouse, however, is the shade cloth making up the walls and ceiling. It provides 35 percent shade from the hot sun.

Another greenhouse has 50 percent shade cloth. Here there are no trees to further block the sun's hot rays; the orchid vines are guided by bamboo poles.

Vanilla orchids flower in the spring, and for a couple of weeks, farmers are kept busy hand-pollinating every flower.

"In the years of our highest production, we had twice the rain that we have now," says Mr. Vallejo. "The dry spell is right after we pollinate. You pollinate, and you wait to see if it takes."

If fertilization occurs and there is no rain, the plant begins to feed off itself, he says. The crop harvested in December required irrigation.

"The plant will mature before its time" with the right care, Mr. Vallejo says. Already he has shaved a year off these vines' growth time.

But for all of his experimentation, some traditions remain rooted in the hearts of his Totonac employees.

Here and there, red ribbons are tied to the vines. This is to ward off evil spirits and ensure a good harvest, explains Reyes Cortés Bautista, 22, one of Mr. Vallejo's Totonac employees. "And to protect the vines from the full moon."

In Totonac culture, a full moon is responsible for everything from ruining a crop to causing a baby's cleft palate.

"I have some plants that aren't protected," says Mr. Bautista, picking up a vine representing an experiment of his own. There is no red ribbon on this plant: it's small and withered, with leaves curved like claws.

If there's a downside to the demand for vanilla, it's that big producers such as Mr. Vallejo have to cope with thieves. Stolen beans will sell for a fraction of what they could bring in a legitimate sale after Dec. 10.

In an orchard where workers have been harvesting beans, Mr. Vallejo points to a small "V" scratched onto the pods. "We mark every pod, and we count them," he says. "And we have to get guards here with guns to guard them."

Even so, someone stole 75 vanilla beans from the orchard on a recent night.

Processing the beans

For all the innovations in the vanilla trade, the curing process in Papantla is still carried out in a time-honored method. Workers put ripe beans through a series of daily "sweats" to bring out the vanilla flavor.

Today, it's after noon when the beans curing in the sun on Mr. Vallejo's farm finally feel hot to the fingertips. Workers quickly wrap them up in the fabric on which they lie and place them in plastic barrels.

The aroma released by the pods is also the flavor, explains Mr. Vallejo. It's necessary to make the beans sweat, but not so much that their flavor dissipates into the mountain air.

"What we try to do is put them out in the sun to cure the least amount of time possible, so we don't lose the smell," he says. "Once they're hot you want to bundle them immediately."

And once bundled, they remain outdoors in the heat so that they continue sweating in their protective coverings without losing their aroma, he says.

It takes about three weeks of this process and then several more months of storage out of sunlight before the beans will reach their fullest flavor.

"Vanilla is something like love," says Mr. Vallejo. "Little by little, constantly, that's what's going to give you the best flavor."

The vanilla culture

In some ways, Mr. Vallejo, a dreamer with new ideas, fits perfectly into Papantla. The city is well into the 21st century as far as some technology goes. For instance, one has only to walk a block or two in any direction before coming upon a room lined with computer terminals. For 10 pesos - about a buck - or less, one can log on to the Internet for an hour. Students do homework and research and send instant messages to each another at the computers.

Yet, across from the biggest Internet café, almost on the cathedral's front steps, is a symbol of a Totonac tradition going back hundreds of years.

Just outside the church's front doors is a pole the voladores use as part of an ancient ritual on weekends. A group of voladores consists of five Totonac men in ceremonial dress who climb the 100-foot-tall pole. One man stands on a tiny platform at the top of the pole playing a flutelike instrument. The rest wind ropes around their waists, and together, drop upside down from the top of the pole and spin gracefully to the ground.

The tradition stems from a prayer ritual to the Totonacs' rain god in times of drought. In the past, the beaded embroidery on the voladores' red velvet costumes used to include vanilla orchids; today, the flowers on the costumes are more generic.

Then there are the longstanding Christian rituals.

On the evening before her feast day, devout followers of the virgin proceed to the cathedral from their neighborhoods. Just as they have done every year prior, they carry her likeness in the form of statues and images behind protective glass. They are accompanied by Totonac dancers, school bands and girls in white dresses. After Mass, they make the pilgrimage back to their neighborhoods, where they will stand vigil over the virgin into the night.

What price flavor?

The next morning, farmers from small villages trickle off dusty buses at a depot a few blocks from the square. Slung over their shoulders are canvas bags holding uncured vanilla beans.

David Rodríguez, who says he represents Papatla buyer Carlos Arellano, is open for business in a small warehouse at the terminal. Hopeful farmers approach, but he is buying vanilla for a disappointing 100 pesos (roughly \$10) a kilo.

This season, world buyers have come together in an effort to drive down the price of vanilla routinely set by the biggest producer, Madagascar; they won't buy until the prices drop.

"Last year, I sold [vanilla] at 400 pesos," says María de Jesus Gómez Sánchez, who has been growing vanilla for three years. She demands to know if the price will go up before the end of the month.

Mr. Rodríguez responds with a question of his own: How can he pay a premium price for her vanilla if he may not be able to sell it later?

"It costs us great effort to grow this," Ms. Sánchez says. "How many of us go hungry so we can work the vanilla? ... I don't plan to kill myself anymore to do this. Give me a hundred pesos to do something else....This is the life of a poor peasant. And they wonder why we go to the U.S."

Mr. Vallejo fears that small farmers such as Ms. Sanchez will throw in the towel. Many of them, he says, will start ripping up their plants and turn to some other crop due to the lack of a stable vanilla price.

"They're going to deactivate at least 50 percent of what took me three years to build up," he says. "And I feel so bad that I think we should go to the government and ask them to help those people.

"It took us three years to build this up," he says. "Before, you could not see vanilla anywhere. Now everybody is talking about vanilla. And the day after tomorrow, everybody will be talking bad about vanilla."

How he will face the farmers whom he persuaded to grow vanilla, he doesn't know.

A few blocks away from the bus station, Heriberto Larios, one of the two remaining vanilla buyers in Papantla, sits in his office. For decades, he has been paying farmers for their vanilla, curing it and then selling it to bigger buyers all over the globe.

But today, he has bought little of the crop. He echoes Mr. Vallejo's concerns.

"When we plant vanilla, we have to plan who we will be selling to," he says. "We sell to the Europeans, to those in Montreal, to the United States, to Japan. They're the buyers, but we are at their mercy."

They've threatened not to buy vanilla until producers drop their price, he says. Last year, he got \$370 per kilo of cured vanilla. "But it got as high as \$500 a kilo," he says. "Today...it's \$40 a kilo."

Mr. Vallejo won't be dissuaded by the volatile market because vanilla is "the most important flavor there is," he says.

"What I have to do is produce with the least cost possible so that I'll be invulnerable to them, you see?" he says.

"And at the end of the run, I have the capacity to do that.

"I want to have the cheapest production so that we can be competitive...and we could multiply by 10 the amount that can be produced in the world," he says.

"I may even make an extract," he says. "I may make arts and crafts. I'll develop the national market...I'm still growing, no matter what's happened."

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