

Vanilla brings cash and crime to Madagascar

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Vanilla's high price, combined with poverty and corruption, makes it a favourite target of criminals

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Bright moonlight reflected off broad banana leaves, but it was still hard to see the blue twine laced through the undergrowth, a tripwire meant to send the unwary tumbling to the ground.

"This is the way the thieves come," said the vanilla farmer, lowering his voice and sweeping his flashlight beam over a ditch.

Each night the farmer, Ninot Oclin, 33, patrols his land in the foothills of a volcano in Madagascar, barefoot, with a bolt-action rifle slung over his shoulder. If he hears someone fall, he knows yet another bandit is trying to steal his lucrative crop of ripening vanilla.

The peasant

The lush mountains in Madagascar's North-East produce about 80 per cent of the world's vanilla, one of the most expensive flavours. Its price has soared, reaching more than



Smells trouble? Employees sort cured vanilla at a warehouse in Antalaha, Madagascar NYT

\$600 a kg last year — more than silver — compared with \$50 a kg in 2013.

Growing Western demand for the flavouring is partly driving the price spike, with vanilla used in everything from ice-cream to alcohol to cosmetics. Supply was diminished by a cyclone that ravaged crops last year on the island, which lies off the coast of South-East Africa.

With the perfect climate and soil for growing vanilla, the Sava region of Madagascar is in the midst of an economic

boom. So-called vanilla mansions have sprung up above traditional thatched grass huts. Even the humblest homes often boast solar panels and LED lights that make once-dark villages glow by night. Gleaming SUVs ply the broken streets of Sambava, the vanilla capital, where bustling markets line the roadsides.

The windfall, however, has come at a cost. Vanilla's high price, combined with rampant poverty and a corrupt, weak state, has made the crop a fa-

vourite target of violent criminal networks. The story of the vanilla trade in Madagascar is one of dangers and rewards, and can be told through three vital links in the chain that delivers the flavour from the fields to port, where it is exported to the world.

Most vanilla still comes from small farms, like Oclin's, where the work is backbreaking. Vanilla plants need to be nurtured for three-four years before they bear pods. The flowers bloom once a year for 24 hours and must be immediately pollinated.

The middleman

Despite the risks, Oclin has seen a small payoff from the vanilla trade. He now has a smartphone and a Facebook account, and his one-room home has a TV and satellite dish powered by solar energy. In Sambava, in the shade of a mango tree, Pascale Rasafindakoto, 44, a "commissionaire," or middleman, waits with dozens of his peers for lower-level sellers to arrive from the countryside with small plastic bags of vanilla beans.

The aroma, texture, and bean size (bigger is better) are examined and a price negotiated. With beans spoiling so quickly, growers have little bargaining power. They often get much less

money for their beans than middlemen like Rasafindakoto receive when selling the beans to a central curing facility.

Tales of commissionaires swindling growers abound. They also are widely accused of lowering overall quality by mixing good and bad vanilla. "The middlemen is where the shady business goes on," Rakotoson said.

The exporter

Michel Lomone presided over his warehouse in Antalaha, watching a small army of aproned women curing, sorting and packing tonnes of dried vanilla into boxes for export to multinational flavoring and fragrance companies.

While wealthy by local standards, Lomone's biggest concern is the same as Oclin's: theft.

Lomone said hundreds of pounds of vanilla have been stolen from his warehouses over the years. All his employees are frisked when they leave work.

"The pods are so small and valuable it's easy to hide them," he said. "It's like with diamonds in South Africa."

Lomone produces the highest quality "bourbon" vanilla, using a curing technique that takes months.

"Vanilla takes patience," Lomone said.