

Reviving Puerto Rico's vanilla industry: how farmers in Castañer are bringing back the island's sweet legacy ^[1]

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This initiative was promoted by farmer Pedro Bengochea Santiago, known as the “vanilla czar.” (Jorge A Ramirez Portela)

Lares - Did you know that vanilla is one of the best-selling products in the world and that Puerto Rico is one of the countries that grows it?

About 20 Puerto Rican farmers joined forces to revive the vanilla industry on the island under an ambitious project established in the Bartolo neighborhood of the town of Castañer, in Lares.

This is the **Vainilla Castañer, LLC collective**, an entity that began its work in 2018 after studying this tropical plant, whose production originated in the area in the 20th century, between the 1930s and 1950s.

The operation employs about 60 people through individual plantings carried out by farm workers from Caguas, Comerío, Utuado, Adjuntas, Jayuya, Arecibo, San Juan, and Lares, among others, who came to the mountains of the town to cultivate the popular spice, a product of a genus of orchids.

Currently, **there are about 25 farms that dedicate part of their land to growing the product, covering approximately 12 acres.**

This initiative was promoted by farmer **Pedro Bengochea Santiago**, known as the “vanilla czar,” who spent 10 years searching for the original seeds, especially the planifolia and pompona

varieties, as well as testing the product and seeking links with vanilla producers in other countries, including Mexico and Colombia.

According to the farmer, publications such as *The New York Times* and agricultural economics magazines around the world rank this product as having a value second only to gold.

“Vanilla is a product in high demand in the United States and Europe. It is a very popular flavoring in Europe and is widely used in perfumes, beverages, confectionery, and other products,” said Bengochea Santiago.

From his farm in the Bartolo neighborhood, the farmer, who also produces **Café Castañer**, contemplates the fruits of his labor as he recounts the history of the world’s most prized spice.

“I have been working the land since 1990, when I acquired this property, and although I have dedicated myself to coffee, which is my main product, I wanted to revive the vanilla industry because Castañer was the first vanilla project on the island, organized in the 1930s under the PRRA (Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration),” said the 70-year-old man.

Bengochea Santiago explained that, at that time, the Laredo neighborhood was chosen for this agricultural project “because of its geographical location and because it had an experimental station. The large coffee plantations were developed here.”

That is why **he decided to revive this industry by planting the product on two of the 52 acres that make up his farm, where he has “alternated vanilla with coffee, using the same shade areas as the coffee for the vanilla because they are compatible.”**

Regarding the varieties of vanilla he harvests, he comments that “in fact, planifolia is for medicinal and flavoring use, and pompona is used for fragrance and beverages.”

Bengochea Santiago has invested about \$20,000 of his own funds, mainly the income he receives from the sale of his coffee. **“The money generated from the sale of coffee, I invest in vanilla,”** he said.

He also explained that the farmers’ collective received a donation of \$60,000 from the **Agricultural Development Innovation Fund (FIDA)** of the Puerto Rico Department of Agriculture.

“It was for the purchase of seeds, vanilla processing, small equipment, supplies, and hiring staff. Some young agronomists worked with us in that process. That was distributed among the collective,” he said.

“From that fund, I strengthened my production and eventually supplied seeds at a reasonable price to other farmers. Today, I am producing seeds and selling them commercially; not in large quantities, but I supply seeds, averaging 2,000 per year,” he added.

It should be noted that the Vainilla Castañer, LLC collective “marketed the seeds and bought the pods from some farmers.”

“The Vainilla Castañer agreement is that members sell their seeds or pods to the collective. Seed sales are an attractive business. My goal is to have seeds for sale, which is another niche market. We are in the process of preparing to better process them and extract them, which is my goal,” said the farmer.

In fact, between 2022 and 2023, the group produced organic forest vanilla extract, but the effort was so successful that they sold the entire product. According to Bengochea Santiago, “next year (2026) we will have a new production.”

“It takes approximately two years to bring the plant into production. The processing and preparation of the vanilla for extraction takes approximately nine months. It is a slow and rigorous process,” he said.

The goal, according to Bengochea Santiago, is for each farmer to be able to generate over \$200,000 annually by consistently working the crop on a plot of land of around 1,000 square meters. The calculation is based on the ideal average at which a producer can maximize their operation in optimal conditions.

“That’s for farmers who have it and take it to the maximum. But the most expensive process is pollination, which is done manually. This is because the model used worldwide is manual pollination,” he noted.

On his farm in Castañer, this farmer employs about three people to grow vanilla, and about 60 “if we count the people who work with this throughout the collective.”

“We hope that the **Department (of Agriculture)** will continue to support us with wage subsidies and subsidies for the purchase of materials. What I have here, I have bought with my own efforts: the wood chipper, the inputs for buying compost, I am the one who buys them,” he said.

Currently, the collective has become the Cooperative of Vanilla Producers and Processors of Puerto Rico (VainillaCoop), established in Caguas “for strategic reasons, because most of them are from there and the Municipality of Caguas provided us with a space to process and manufacture it.”

“The cooperative will be dedicated to the production, processing, and distribution of vanilla. However, its existence will not eliminate the Vainilla Castañer LLC corporation, which will continue as a partner of the cooperative,” he revealed.

Although he did not specify how much money the collective operation has generated, he said that the product is sold locally in tourist shops in Old San Juan, in supermarkets such as Econo, at farmers’ markets, and to various chefs who appreciate its local flavor.

The work begins at Casa Bartolo

According to the “vanilla czar,” the call to revive the industry has been made from Casa Bartolo, in the town of Castañer. **It is a museum and interactive coffee center that has antique machinery for grinding the beans, as well as memorabilia from significant events in the history of this crop in Puerto Rico.**

“Here you can enjoy a plantation with sustainable practices, beautiful flora, harvesting, and processing, all in an ecological way. In addition, you can experience a replica of a coffee plantation where the process of roasting, grinding, and packaging its specialty coffee, Castañer Supremo, is shown, and you will find vanilla, cacao, and small fruit crops,” he said.

“This is the project for the country that I, Pedro Bengochea, want to leave to future generations. A model, sustainable project to preserve the environment, to live among the birds and nature, to grow vanilla, coffee, and cocoa in a sustainable way,” he concluded.

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