



N°5

Costa Rica Experience of the International 2013 Vanilla Symposium

*Geri Brown, Vanilla producer



Every two years, since 2003, there is a symposium held in the United States for and by people in the vanilla industry. The speakers include experts in fields such as genetics, flavor and food sciences, food engineering and physics, nutrition strategies, fragrance, plant biology and pathology. Other speakers include highly involved and influential industry leaders such as Rick Brownell, known as one of the world's foremost authorities on the vanilla market and Henry Todd, Jr. VP of International Operations at Virginia Dare, as well as John Hallagan, JD with The Flavor and Extract Manufacturers Association (FEMA). The 2013 symposium, held in

Síganos en [facebook](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Aprovainilla/645541728789606?ref=ts) <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Aprovainilla/645541728789606?ref=ts>

New Jersey, included speakers from Germany, France, Mexico and several areas of the United States including many who have spent decades traveling in and out of Madagascar, New Guinea and Tahiti as well as Australia and other countries developing and studying the vanilla industry, markets and products.

Robert Brown and I had the privilege to attend the event in November aptly named “Vanilla 2013 Sustainability: Keeping Vanilla Growing” as representatives of not only our own plantation “Grupo Las Cinco Ramas” located in Pavon de Los Chiles, but also as the representatives of the producers and emerging market here in Costa Rica.

Many of these experts and others around the world agree on one important thought when it comes to vanilla; that Sustainability is crucial but a continually struggling issue. For decades Madagascar has dominated the top slot in production and quality, producing over 80% and at times over 90%, of the world’s vanilla supply. Many efforts have been made by interested parties around the world to improve infrastructure, in education, quality of both plant care and curing processes, as well as genetics and many other issues, over the decades in Madagascar. These efforts have helped to create a more uniform standard of quality in the vanilla used worldwide. They have also helped to create a *more* predictable supply although given the political instability in the country, the dramatic weather and the vast lack of resources, the efforts are exceedingly difficult to maintain and often are lacking.



After many years of support and patience invested into the country a concerned consumers’ market place has begun looking for ways to reduce their own risks related to having a single supplier of this vital ingredient. The common goal appears to be to improve the balance between quality, communication of

expectations between producer and buyer, as well as the ever dramatic push and pull of supply and demand. Or in short, the buyers are seeking stability and predictability in both quality and supply.

One of the current strategies that have been proposed by flavor houses and consumers who depend hugely on the ingredient such as Coca Cola, McCormick and Kraft is sourcing vanilla outside of Madagascar, i.e. the diversification of suppliers geographically. They have found other locations in the latitudes most optimum for growing vanilla, in addition to investment in a variety of species that have helped to reduce risks of the aforementioned instability in their supply when it comes to plant hardiness. In spite of this branching out and diversification, Madagascar remains the producer of over 80% of the world's vanilla supply. Another solution that has helped to stabilize supply for these large consumers has been found in synthetic vanilla, and in some cases GMOs. The synthetic version of vanilla serves as an affordable and stable alternative to natural vanilla and is locally supplied for and by many of these large companies around the world. This has contributed to a disruption in the supply chain that has become customary in the natural vanilla industry, typically including at least 5-10 changes of hands before arriving at the end user.

The feedback that we received in the symposium was hugely encouraging for ourselves and our emerging producers here in Costa Rica. Both the North American and European consumers are becoming more conscious of what they are buying and more aware of both health and environmental issues. Grupo Cinco Ramas was introduced to the vanilla community along with samples of our exclusive Costa Rican hybrid pods in the form of a one fold extract. There was overwhelming, encouraging feedback. We are confident that the need for new producers exists and that our location and specialty species will be accepted by today's consumers. The only thing we need to do in Costa Rica is a better job in terms of regular supply than other producers.

By creating Costa Rican quality brand recognition and identifying genetics and standardizing quality standards we can easily compete with producers who have been established for generations. It is crucial that we focus our energy and resources on solving the problems that are pushing the consumers to seek diversification in suppliers. By improving our communication within AproVanilla and building the Costa Rican Quality brand and standards, we as producers can secure our future as a world supplier of vanilla.

