

## **“CBS SUNDAY MORNING: NOT SO PLAIN”**

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**Link to Entry: <https://vimeo.com/444038896>**

In the rainforests of Madagascar, Seth Doane discovers the extraordinarily colorful -- and sometimes dark -- story of a familiar spice: vanilla.

Shortly before the shutdown, Doane traveled to the island, one of the most poor and remote on earth, to learn how vanilla is grown, cured, and exported. He found a story that's deliciously complex - mixing corruption and theft, profit and poverty -- and more than anything, highlights the wonder of nature.

Vanilla cannot be grown on factory farms. Instead Malagasy vanilla farmers must hand-pollinate as many as 40 million vanilla orchids one by one -- before noon -- on the day they bloom. Nine months later green vanilla pods grow on the vine. This labor-intensive crop is so valuable -- recently the price per pound has been higher than silver -- that farmers must guard their crops all night long. “I fear people may be coming to kill me, “ one farmer told Doane. The year before, half his crop was stolen.

Madagascar is by far the world's largest exporter of this lucrative crop -- growing 80% of the global supply -- but its place at the top is linked to another statistic at the bottom: 90% of Malagasy people survive on less than \$2 a day. And in a country where there are few good jobs, the vanilla business can be both extremely rewarding - and dangerous. “Through the entire vanilla process there is cheating, stealing, theft,” Josephine Lochhead, a vanilla exporter, told Doane. We took hidden cameras into a market in Antananarivo, the capital, and saw how people hawk low-quality vanilla that was likely stolen. And we visited a prison where more than half the population - including over 100 children - was accused of stealing vanilla, a serious crime in Madagascar.

That's why Lochhead, the owner of a 100-year-old flavor company, travels 10,000 miles to gauge each year's crop on her own, and develop personal relationships with the farmers. Some have made so much money from growing vanilla that they can now afford cars and motorcycles. Others are still living in mud huts and survive by selling a few beans at a time.

At least 95% of “vanilla” products don't actually contain real vanilla -- synthetic vanilla can be produced in the lab for a 20th of the cost. But the complexity of the flavor cannot be recreated. “If synthetic vanilla were as good as pure vanilla, that would be the way to go. We wouldn't have to go through all of this laborious, tedious, risky process,” Lochhead told us. Real vanilla has more than 300 aromatic compounds which is why the spice is so complex - with a story, and

a history, as rich as it's flavor. "Vanilla is a work of art, " Lockhead told us. "You can't just treat it like a bag of sugar. There's so much human labor that goes into this remarkable product."

We are proud of this story and thank you very much for your consideration for a Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Award.