

Mexican “Vanilla” With Coumarin: No Bargain



FDA/Capt. Cynthia Kunkel

Tourists tempted to pick up bargains south of the border should beware of one bargain that isn't always a good buy—so-called Mexican “vanilla.” This flavoring product may smell like vanilla, taste like vanilla, and be offered at a cheap price. But it's often made with coumarin, a toxic substance banned in food in the United States.

In addition to being sold in Mexico and other Latin American countries, the coumarin-containing product has appeared on the shelves of some U.S. stores. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advises consumers not to purchase this product.

Pure vanilla is made with the extract of beans from the vanilla plant, a type of orchid that grows as a vine. Mexican vanilla is frequently made with the extract of beans from the tonka tree, an entirely different plant that belongs to the pea family. Tonka bean extract contains cou-

These bottles of “vanilla” are on FDA’s import alert list and are not allowed to be sold in the United States.

Don't buy a food product in the United States that is not labeled in English. (Products sold only in Puerto Rico are an exception ...)

marin, a compound related to warfarin, which is in some blood-thinning medications. Eating food containing coumarin may be especially risky for people taking blood-thinning drugs because the interaction of coumarin and blood thinners can increase the likelihood of bleeding.

Coumarin Banned in Food

Since 1954, FDA has banned coumarin from all food products sold in the United States. Yet the agency has found Mexican vanilla with coumarin in some ethnic food stores and Mexican restaurants in the United States. These products usually have been improperly brought into the country.

If vanilla products that were suspected of containing coumarin were shipped through regular commercial channels, FDA and the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol would stop them at the border because these products are listed on an import alert. An import alert document identifies manufacturers and products that have a history of—or are suspected of—violating the law so that federal agents can keep the products from entering the United States. It is important to note that not all vanilla from Latin American countries contains coumarin. (See the list of manufacturers in the Import Alert under “For More Information.”)

Standards for Vanilla

FDA standards specify that only vanilla beans can be used to make vanilla for use in any food product. Vanilla-like flavors that don't meet the standard must be labeled as “imitation” vanilla and must be made from safe ingredients that are permitted for that use.

FDA does not allow tonka bean extract even in imitation vanilla. Because they contain coumarin, tonka beans do not meet the food safety requirements for sale in the United States under the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act.

Tips for Consumers

- Be wary about buying vanilla in Mexico and other Latin American countries. Look for “vanilla bean” in the ingredient list on the label. If it has “tonka bean” or if there is no ingredient list or a vague one, avoid this product.
- Don't risk your health to save a few dollars. Vanilla with coumarin is generally sold at a lower price than pure vanilla because tonka beans are cheaper to grow than vanilla beans. If the price sounds too good to be true, pass it up.
- Don't buy a food product in the United States that is not labeled in English. Products may have Spanish

or other non-English labeling, but they must also have complete English labeling to meet U.S. Government standards. (Products sold only in Puerto Rico are an exception—they are not required to be labeled in English.)

- Call the FDA Consumer Complaint Coordinator for your geographic area if you suspect that a food product sold in the United States has been imported illegally. (See list of contacts at www.fda.gov/opacom/backgrounders/complain.html.) 

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For More Information

Import Alert on Coumarin in Vanilla Products
www.fda.gov/ora/fiars/ora_import_ia2807.html

Know Before You Go: Rules for Bringing Items Back From Your Trip
www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/vacation/kbyg/