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Some 'Vanilla Extract' Produced in Mexico is No Bargain

Tourists tempted to pick up bargains south of the border should beware of one bargain that isn't a good buy—a so-called “vanilla” flavoring or extract that isn't vanilla flavoring or extract at all, but instead is made from a completely different plant material that contains coumarin. Coumarin is a substance with potential toxic side effects banned from food in the United States. This flavoring product may smell like vanilla extract, taste like vanilla extract, and be offered at a cheap price, but it could present a significant risk to some people's health.



Pure vanilla flavoring and extract are made with the extract of beans from the vanilla plant, a type of orchid that grows as a vine. The product containing coumarin is made from the extract of beans from the tonka tree, an entirely different plant that belongs to the pea family. Tonka bean extract contains coumarin, 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.

These products often are labeled in Spanish “Extracto de vainilla” or “Vainilla.” If these products contain tonka beans rather than vanilla beans, they have been imported illegally into the United States, and FDA advises consumers not to purchase or use these products.

Tips for Consumers

- Be wary about buying products labeled "Vainilla" or "Extracto de Vainilla" 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, do not purchase this product.

- Don't risk your health to save a few dollars. A coumarin-containing product labeled as vanilla extract or flavoring is generally sold at a lower price than pure vanilla flavoring or extract 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.

For additional information, contact the Wildcat Extension District, Crawford County, 620-724-8233, Labette County, 620-784-5337, Montgomery County, 620-331-2690, Pittsburg Office, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education (EFNEP), 620-232-1930. Our website is <http://www.wildcatdistrict.k-state.edu/> or follow us on Facebook: Wildcat Extension District.

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