

The flavour of success: Amani Vanilla Temerloh

Although vanilla is a flavouring most often used in western desserts, the lush flowering vines that yield the precious vanilla pods grow best in the humid weather more often associated with the tropics. Delicate, light green orchid blooms precede the arrival of the pods, and harvest occurs about nine months after pollination.

The world's largest vanilla-producing countries include Madagascar, Mexico, Tahiti and neighbouring Indonesia, particularly Flores. Despite having the perfect conditions for vanilla to thrive, Malaysia is not a producer — and Pahang-based vanilla farmer Mohd Feisal Mohd Norawi is determined to change this. “Apart from my farm, there is another one in Sabah, so there is a huge opportunity here. Malaysia is currently not on the radar screen for vanilla farming but there is no reason why we can't become a major producer and add to our agricultural portfolio,” he says eagerly.

Worth more by weight than even silver, vanilla's soaring prices — it is one of the world's most expensive spices, only behind saffron — have to do with a number of factors, including theft, complex pollination, extreme weather and rising demand in the face of the all-natural food movement.

“In Madagascar, which is the world's largest vanilla producer, a major threat are typhoons that destroy farms. This affects both quantity and quality which, in turn, affects the price. We don't have any of these problems, which is why vanilla farming in Malaysia would be a very good idea,” explains Feisal, a former journalist at Malay-language publication *Sinar Harian*.

His farm is located in Temerloh, Pahang. With an initial investment of RM20,000, he acquired seedpods from Indonesia and started his farm on land owned by his family in 2008. “I started researching vanilla farming in 2006 and I realised that it would be quite a good idea to start something like this. Vanilla plants don't need a lot of land, there is demand for it and prices remain high. And no one else was doing it at the time — certainly not in Peninsular Malaysia.”

The majority of the world's vanilla comes from the *V. planifolia* species, its colloquial names drawn from the regions it is most produced in — for example, Bourbon vanilla is named after the former name of Réunion Island, Île Bourbon, while Madagascar vanilla reflects its famous African home. *V. planifolia* is also the species grown in Indonesia, which Feisal cultivates here as well.

From an initial half an acre plot, Feisal's farm has now grown to 1.5 acres and his production stands at 89kg per year. His customer base is limited by his yield. There are individual buyers who come by the farm — he gets a lot of backpackers who find this a unique souvenir — while most of his stock is bought by food companies. The domestic market is a huge opportunity he would



like to access but he is limited by his production — he simply does not grow enough vanilla yet.

“I can't expand my customer base unless my production goes up. Right now, it's still quite conservative. I have had to turn away a number of distributors because I don't produce enough vanilla pods. The major challenge with vanilla farming isn't just the labour-intensive process but that it takes time — it takes three years before the plants start to produce the orchid flowers, the full vine takes two months to flower and we have to pollinate very quickly so the pods would grow.”

Feisal is constantly on the lookout for advanced farming techniques that would increase productivity, and recently experimented with something new on a small 20ft by 40ft plot within his farm. “It has a better irrigation system, more systematic planting and is a more efficient way overall — if this works, then I can apply it to the whole farm. I am really hoping it works out,” he says.

Apart from tending his farm, Feisal is working hard to promote the idea of vanilla farming as a supplement to the nation's agricultural offerings — on the Amani Vanilla Temerloh Facebook page, he sells vanilla seedlings and provides tips and advice, while on the farm, he provides lessons. A passionate advocate, he is unselfish about sharing whatever information and insights that he has, with the objective of encouraging more people to try their hand at vanilla farming.

“I am proof that it can be done,” Feisal says confidently. “I would really like to see more people become involved in vanilla farming because the more established the industry, the more successful we can all be together.”
— Anandhi Gopinath