

issued by the National Institute for Food and Drug Surveillance (or INVIMA), created a sanitary registry for producing this drink.

The activism of Martinez, her father and their community helped sway the Colombian government to not only lift the ban and legalize viche but also to recognize it as the cultural and ancestral heritage drink specific to Afro-Colombian and Black communities. This was a huge deal.

In 2019, the country's Constitutional Court ruled that a law protecting ancestral beverages in Indigenous communities must also apply to Afro-Colombian ones. This kicked open the door for viche's legalization, which is declared the collective heritage of the Afro-Pacific people. Viche is considered a symbol of the generational exclusion of Black and Indigenous cultures from Colombia's national history and narrative and how the country did not recognize all their contributions from the community. Viche is also currently under consideration by UNESCO to be declared a Colombian heritage drink.

The legalization allows viche to be produced on a large scale and commercialized by only Afro-Colombians. It restricts production to ancestral communities, like how mezcal and tequila are only made in specific Mexican states.

## ALL IN THE COMMUNITY

Martinez earned a master's in marketing while studying in Australia. She returned to Colombia before the pandemic because her father was sick and decided to stay. "I started talking to dad about recipes, production process, etc. I started to see a strategy for a sustainable business, an area my dad lacked concerning how to get income. Martinez suggested going from plastic to glass and worked on making the labels and market-



Oswaldo Martinez Chaverra

ing more visually appealing. "Dad was the engineer, so he dealt with the chemicals and recipes and works with leaders in the family communities." These family communities are families that are all involved in the viche process, and there are many.

"Fifteen years ago, he decided to ask each family to help with production and be a community industry. So, all the families have a piece of land for the sugar canes; they all help."

With the community collective, the work doesn't take as long as one would think. "It takes 10-15 days, start to finish," Martinez says. "A family he works with independently takes and juices the sugar cane; then they ferment it for five to eight days. They are closer to a body of water, so they can do that." Martinez also says that these sugar cane drinks were once popular in the Caribbean, but the Caribbean lost interest because they weren't making money.

In her area, they didn't lose revenue. "Viche is only made in places next to a river." One sugar cane takes one to two inches of water a week to maintain adequate soil moisture. Martinez said that the community has 50 hectares (one hectare is equivalent to almost 2.5 acres, about the area of a Manhattan city block).

She points out that it wasn't just the Afro-Colombians making it. "When we hired lawyers to represent us," says Martinez, "They were surprised with how our community works. 70-80% of our community is involved in this. Not only Black people but also Indigenous people, and you don't see these groups working together. We built a sense of community work. We pay competitive wages and have agreements, contracts and independent contractors. Everyone is paid



equally." She says they are proud of their hard work, and "we bring people into the community to show them our process."

On top of its medicinal benefits, viche also boasts a 35% alcohol content. However, Martinez says, "90% of families in Colombia have it to use for medicine and you don't get hungover."

## GLOBAL GOALS

Right now, viche is typically sold near beach fronts or roadside, but Martinez has big ambitions. "In the short term, for INVIMA to define and clarify more about the rules and procedures to assist us with permits," she says. "Everything is on paper, so we can be 100% sure we're formally operating and commercializing."

"Long term, it would be getting everything regulated so we can export to open markets like the US, Oceania, and everything else. Our main goal is getting viche to overseas consumers and opening new international markets."

Follow Martinez for Viche Canao product and expansion updates on Instagram (@viche\_canao). Orders can be placed in Colombia by calling or texting +57 321 8823512 on WhatsApp.

