



Liseth Martinez and Community Preserve Colombian Ancestral Drink with Viche Canao

BY STEPHANIE TEASLEY

Viche (pronounced “vee-chey,” also called “biche”) is a Colombian drink native to Afro-Colombian communities in the Pacific region, made from fermented sugar cane juice and distilled with local fruits and herbs. On top of being an alcoholic drink, it also boasts medicinal benefits for stomach bugs or parasites, and it’s used as an aphrodisiac to promote fertility. Despite its production and community usage, Viche was banned and illegal in Colombia until 2021.

Liseth Martinez and her father, Oswaldo Martinez Chaverra, are from Chocó, a region in Western Colombia known for its large Afro-Colombian population. Martinez says that the production of viche is a family business. “My father has been doing it for 30 years,” she says.

HISTORY OF VICHE

Viche originated from the Bantu languages of East-Central Africa, meaning “green” or “raw.”

It was an ancestral community practice used as traditional medicine by midwives and herbalist masters, as they were called, to treat and heal wounds and colic, control parasites, or ward off evil spirits and fear.

On Colombia’s Pacific Coast, viche was created by formally enslaved people and became a trade belonging to the Colombian Pacific’s social structures and family and domestic organization. This practice was inherited through generations and gained popularity due to the government’s monopoly on cane liquor. Martinez says that one company controlled all the alcohol and didn’t want to share profits with the community.

Martinez also says they didn’t make it easy for anyone in the community. “Companies and corporations, even the police, went after dad and the community,” she says. “It was controversial; they never gave a reason why they tried to shut down the production sites.”

Martinez says she and her father live in a more rural area, so the focus wasn’t on them as much as on the bigger populations.

Another contributing factor to its illegal status was the drink’s reputation because of the process, which is a community effort. The elder Martinez says this used to be something only men did, but women got into it little by little, and viche is now known to be traditionally made by women who are called “sacadoras.” Because so many hands were involved in making viche, it got a reputation for being unhygienic.

However, Martinez and her father decided to take an active role, speaking out about the process and garnering support for its legalization. “We were a part of a board to discuss the legislation that led to the law protecting production. It took three and a half years of activism before it happened and created a permit for viche.” The permit,

PHOTOGRAPHY: VICHE CANAO; PICTURED: LISETH MARTINEZ (SECOND FROM THE LEFT) WITH COMMUNITY LEADER AND PRODUCERS CLEOTILDE PALACIOS, CALLETANA CHALA AND YASSIRY MOSQUERA