Mindset for IELTS Practice Tests: Test 2 - READING PASSAGE 1

You should spend about 20 minutes on Questions 1–13, which are based on Reading Passage 1 below.

Vanilla

Vanilla is a spice which is mainly used nowadays as a flavouring for foods such as ice cream and yogurt. It is obtained from the pods of several different species of plants called orchids, and is a native of South and Central America and the Caribbean.The first people to have cultivated vanilla seem to have been the Totonacs of Mexico's east coast. The Aztecs acquired it when they conquered the Totonacs in the 15th century, and the spice was brought to Europe when they were in turn conquered by the Spanish.

In Mexico, vanilla had been used as a flavouring for drinking chocolate, and Europeans initially followed suit, but in the early 17th century vanilla-flavoured desserts were created, and by the next century, vanilla was being used to flavour ice cream in France. In the 1800s, the French transported vanilla plants to the islands of Réunion and Mauritius, off the east coast of Africa, hoping to grow them there. However, they found that these orchids were sterile and did not produce vanilla beans. It was later learned that particular bees, which only lived in Mexico, were required to pollinate the orchids. Efforts to export these to the French islands were unsuccessful, as they could not survive the long journey. But in 1841, a 12-year-old boy in Réunion called Edmond Albius discovered how to hand-pollinate the orchids with small sticks. This simple technique, which is still used now, meant that vanilla plantations sprang up across the globe. Indonesia is now a significant supplier, but the principal source is Madagascar. Vanilla beans from this island are known as "bourbon vanilla."

The problem with vanilla is its price. It is the second most expensive spice in the world, after saffron. It is a stunningly complex and subtle spice, containing hundreds of different flavour and fragrance components. The most prominent of these is vanillin (4-hydroxy-3-methoxybenzaldehyde), which is relatively straightforward to synthesise from petrochemicals, making it a cheap alternative to natural vanilla.

The cultivation, harvesting, and curing of vanilla is a very labour-intensive process, which explains its high cost. After they have been planted, the vines need to be attached to supports, and then grow to a maximum height of 1.5 metres. The first flowers do not appear until three years later. At this stage, workers must check the

Questions 1–7

Answer the questions below.

Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the passage for each answer.

1. From which group of people did the Spaniards learn about vanilla?

   _____

2. What did Europeans first consume with vanilla?

   _____

3. What were vanilla plants pollinated by in Mexico?

   _____

4. What is used to hand-pollinate vanilla plants today?

   _____

5. Where does most vanilla come from at present?

   _____

6. According to this passage, what is the most expensive spice in the world?

   _____

7. From which source can synthetic vanillin be obtained?

   _____

LIVEWORKSHEETS

plants carefully as each flower must be pollinated by hand within 12 hours of appearing. This task is carried out in the early morning. If the flower is not pollinated immediately, it will wilt and drop off the plant.

Once successfully pollinated, the flowers will then produce green pods, and seven to nine months later, a yellow colour will appear at the tips, indicating that they are ripe and that the beans can be harvested. Again, this is done by hand. Late harvesting could lead to a high number of split beans, which lowers their value considerably. Harvesting too early could lead to poor-quality beans in terms of aroma and flavour characteristics, as the vanillin content — a key flavour component — will be lower.

The next stage in the process is dipping, which is critical to ensuring the best quality vanilla beans. This should begin within one week of harvesting. The beans are plunged into water which has been heated to between 65°C and 76°C for ten seconds to three minutes. The exact timing depends on the size of the beans, whether they have split on the vine, and the water temperature. Dipping is performed by a master curer who calculates these variables by observation and feel. It prevents any further ripening, and initiates the release of an enzyme which converts glucovanillin to vanillin.

The next phase is known as sweating. Immediately after the beans have been taken from the water, the workers tightly wrap them in blankets. They are then stored inside a dark, airtight container.This helps to preserve the steam and heat, and enables the conversion of starches and cellulose to vanillin, along with other complex components that are responsible for giving vanilla its subtle aroma. During this phase, the beans remain tightly wrapped for a period of two weeks. Throughout this time, it is vital that the beans are kept warm, as cooling could trigger the growth of mould. To prevent this from happening, the rolls are unwrapped and the beans laid out in the sun during the daytime, and then rolled up again at night.

As soon as they begin to develop an aroma and reach the correct moisture level, the beans are left out to dry in the open air. The racks on which they are placed are moved between the shade and the sun in order to drive out any residual moisture. This continues for about four weeks. Finally, they are sorted and tied into bundles, wrapped in wax paper, and placed in metal conditioning boxes, where they are kept for one month. Usually, the beans are shipped during this phase so that the conditioning is complete once they have arrived at their destination.

Questions 8–13

Complete the flow-chart below. Choose **ONE WORD ONLY** from the passage for each answer.

The growing and processing of vanilla

Planting

The vines grow on supports.

Pollination

The flower must be pollinated within 12 hours.

Harvesting

The beans are ready to harvest when their **8** ..... become yellow.

Dipping

The beans are briefly dipped in hot water to activate the **9** ....., which produces vanillin.

Sweating

The beans are rolled in **10** ..... and kept in the dark. They are unrolled and placed in the sun regularly to prevent **11** ..... from developing.

Drying

The beans are air-dried on **12** .....

Conditioning

Bundles of beans are wrapped and kept in special **13** ..... . Conditioning often continues during shipping.

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