



A woman collects rose petals early in the morning in the Rose Valley, near the town of Pavel Banya.



Damask roses picked at dawn in the Rose Valley, near the town of Pavel Banya.



Women carry plastic bags filled with rose petals early in the morning in the Rose Valley, near the town of Pavel Banya.

INFLATION A THORN IN THE SIDE OF BULGARIA ROSE OIL MAKERS

Business is not a bed of roses for Bulgaria's rose oil makers these days. Made from Damask roses grown in the aptly named Rose Valley, the oil is a vital ingredient in the perfumes made by the world's top luxury brands such as Christian Dior, Estee Lauder and Chanel. But a heatwave has slashed this year's harvest of rose petals, labor is hard to find and the global surge in energy prices has increased costs for a product so precious that it is dubbed "liquid gold".

This year's oil will be "considerably more expensive," Plamen Stankovski, a partner at rose oil producer and exporter Bulattars, told AFP in his distillery near Pavel Banya, in Bulgaria's famed Rose Valley. Production costs for one kilogram of rose oil stood at around 6,000 euros (\$6,300) in 2021, but they have surged by as much as 40 percent this year. The price of petals alone doubled since last year, according to producers.

This means that a 4.5-kilo glass jar filled with the thick, golden-yellow oil could sell for more than 45,000 euros this year. Bulgaria is the world's top rose oil maker along with Turkey and the distilleries to make the precious substance run on natural gas, diesel and fuel oil-com-



People collect rose petals early in the morning in the Rose Valley, near the town of Pavel Banya.

modities whose prices soared after Russia invaded Ukraine in late February. "The price of fuel has gone up two or even three times," Stankovski said.

'Not all roses'

Small amounts of rose oil are used in almost every high-quality perfume-not for

its aroma, but because its fixative qualities help blend other ingredients and prolong the scent on the skin. To produce it, huge amounts of petals are boiled in massive metal vats. The vapors are then distilled to separate the oil in a process nearly unchanged since the days of the Ottoman empire in the 17th century.

On his family's rose fields near Pavel Banya, Dimitar Dimitrov laments that a chronic labor shortage has plagued the sector for years. "Picking is the most expensive as it is done solely by hand. If you don't pick the open roses today, tomorrow they're gone," said the 40-year-old, who plucked petals with his father and brother-in-law.

Fertilizer, fuel, ploughing and pruning have all become more expensive, he said. With petal prices almost doubling, he said he hoped "this will cover at least our production costs so we don't end up in the red". To make things worse, a heatwave scorched rose buds before they could open, slashing yields and reducing the picking season by half.

The flowers that survived excrete less oil. To extract one kilo of rose oil, 4,000 kilograms of petals are now needed, 15 percent more than usual. "We are worried by the increased cost of our production," said exporter Filip Lissicharov, CEO of the Enio Bonchev Production company in the nearby village of Tarnichane. "The picture is not all roses," he added.

More fuel is now needed to sustain production, which is interrupted by irregular petal deliveries, but the industry association's calls for fuel subsidies have thus

far gone unanswered by the government. Rose oil production is expected to drop below its usual annual haul of 2.5 tons.

Certified as 'pure'

Nearly 100 percent of the oil produced in Bulgaria is exported to places such as France, Germany, Switzerland, the United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Lissicharov is anxious about how the market will react to higher prices.

"There's interest (from buyers)," he said. "But whether this interest will turn into deals depends on the price." To prevent counterfeit products from entering the market, the oil is certified by a few designated labs, such as the state Bulgarska Rosa Laboratory in Sofia. The product leaves the lab in hermetically-sealed aluminum flasks with a label that guarantees "100-percent pure and natural genuine Bulgarian rose oil". Cutting corners, Stankovski said, is not an option: "Regardless of our troubles, we will preserve the high quality of the rose oil." — AFP



People collect rose petals early in the morning in the Rose Valley, near the town of Pavel Banya. — AFP photos

FBI seizes Basquiat paintings amid doubts over authenticity

FBI agents seized all 25 works at a Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibit in Florida amid questions about their authenticity, the museum which was showing them said Saturday. The Orlando Museum of Art said it had complied with a request for access to works at the show called "Heroes and Monsters: Jean-

Michel Basquiat" and that the paintings are now in the hands of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "It is important to note that we still have not been led to believe the Museum has been or is the subject of any investigation," museum spokeswoman Emilia Bourmas-Fry said in an email sent to AFP.

The exhibit had been due to close June 30. The museum said it would keep cooperating. The FBI did not immediately reply to AFP's request for comment. The paintings were done on scavenged pieces of cardboard and were largely unseen until this exhibit began in February, The New York Times reported in a story on Friday's confiscation of the works. The Times said that it had learned last month that one of the works was painted on the back of a shipping box that bore instructions to "Align top of FedEx Shipping Label here."

But the instructions were in a typeface that was not used until 1994, six years

after the artist died, the paper said, quoting a designer who worked for Federal Express. The FBI seized the paintings with a warrant based on a 41-page affidavit that said the agency's probe had unearthed "false information related to the alleged prior ownership of the paintings," the Times said. The probe also revealed "attempts to sell the paintings using false provenance, and bank records show possible solicitation of investment in artwork that is not authentic."

The owners of the works as well as the director of the museum, Aaron De Groft, say Basquiat made these paintings in 1982 and sold them to a now deceased

television screenwriter named Thad Mumford for \$5,000, the Times said. They said Mumford put them in a storage unit and apparently forgot about them for 30 years. But in the affidavit related to the search warrant, FBI special agent Elizabeth Rivas states that she interviewed Mumford in 2014 and learned that "Mumford never purchased Basquiat artwork and was unaware of any Basquiat artwork being in his storage locker," the Times said. If authentic the paintings would be worth around \$100 million, it added, quoting art experts. — AFP



'In This Case' by Jean-Michel Basquiat is on display during a preview of the upcoming 21st Century Evening Sale at Christie.



Posters of art at the launch of the Jean-Michel Basquiat for Etnia Barcelona Collection in Brooklyn, New York. — AFP photos