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Bitter taste of imported sugar for Cuba

40 Sugar: it's so quintessentially Cuban that even a young, machete-wielding Fidel Castro used to hack away at the cane stalks vital to the Caribbean island's economy.

Now, the long-time world leader in sugar production is importing the stuff for the first time, and in large amounts, from France after another bad harvest.

Sugar used to account for the vast majority of Cuba's

exports. But the fall of its big brother, the Soviet Union – a key, hungry customer – changed everything, as did a lack of investment in seeds, fertilizer and pesticides.

The 2017-2018 harvest suffered badly after Hurricane Irma ravaged the country, followed by a long rainy season.

Sugar from cane tends to be brownish. But the French version comes from beets so it is whiter, and the granules are finer. And that is what Cubans started receiving with their "libreta" – their ration book. "The sugar we get now is very good. It is very sweet, not very different. The only difference is the colour," said Felicia Navarro, a 40-year-old homemaker.

The French government farm and seafood export agency FranceAgriMer said that from 2001 to 2017, Cuba had imported just three tonnes of sugar from France. But in just three summer months this year – June, July and August – that number ballooned to 40,000 tonnes.

"This is the first time in history that Cuba is importing significant amounts of sugar from France," FranceAgriMer said.

These new numbers are humiliating for Cuba, given its past as the world's largest producer of sugar and one of the biggest exporters. Until 1960, the US was one of its main customers. There used to be 150 factories in Cuba for processing sugar cane. Now there are only around 50.



A man weighs sugar produced in France at a grocery store in Havana.