

Bulgaria tops lavender oil producers ranking



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KAZANLAK, Bulgaria (AP) — Dozens of workers waded through a sea of purple, picking lavender blossoms in the sweltering heat. The 100-degree Fahrenheit temperatures give the blossoms their highest concentration of oil — a liquid treasure that is prized by perfume makers around the world.

Bags packed with lavender petals are taken to the nearby distillery where workers press them

by foot before the precious oil is extracted in a steam distillation process.

Bulgaria has overtaken France in the past three years as the world's biggest producer of lavender oil. The Balkan country has doubled its production from 60 metric tons in 2011 to an expected 120 tons this year, as other Balkan countries cut production, according to one of the country's top producers.

"Bulgaria took advantage of this niche," said Filip Lissicharov, owner of Enio Bonchev lavender oil company in this central Bulgarian town.

Nikolay Ninov, an expert at the state-run laboratory for essential oils, said the lavender industry can be a boon for Bulgaria as it struggles to overcome poverty.

"Bulgaria, the EU's poorest country with its high unemployment rate, scores of skilled farmers, a favorable climate and unspoiled fields provides a promising blend for essential oil producers," Ninov said.