

‘El Vicentillo,’ El Chapo’s ex-logistics guru, was a cartel big shot since teens
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Vicente “El Vicentillo” Zambada Niebla after his arrest in Mexico in 2009. | AP

When Vicente Zambada Niebla was indicted in Chicago in 2009 as part of the sweeping criminal case against reputed Mexican drug kingpin Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman Loera and his Sinaloa cartel, Zambada was portrayed as one of the logistical masterminds of the multibillion-dollar narcotics-trafficking network.

Zambada was 35 years old at the time. What the Chicago indictment didn’t say was that he was a big player in the cartel since he was just a teenager being groomed to run the family business.

His early years in the cartel, handling cocaine shipments of more than a ton each, are documented in a Washington indictment to which he recently pleaded guilty.

Zambada, now 43, is in federal custody awaiting sentencing in the Chicago case. Authorities have said they are keeping his location secret out of concerns for his safety. In his plea agreement with the feds here, he agreed to snitch on El Chapo and the cartel.

El Chapo is scheduled to stand trial in New York in November.



Authorities escort Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman from a plane in New York in 2017. | AP

In the Chicago case, Zambada admitted orchestrating a sophisticated operation that used 747s, trains, submarines and tractor-trailers to move narcotics from Colombia to Mexico to Chicago and other parts of the United States for El Chapo. That case centered on cartel drug activities since 2005. He pleaded guilty in that case in 2013.

In July, he pleaded guilty to a separate indictment, which was returned in Washington in 2003. That case detailed the cartel’s activities since the 1990s. Even then, according to the deals described in the Washington case, Zambada was a major player in the cartel.

His father, reputed drug lord Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada Garcia, was a co-leader of the cartel with El Chapo. The son, known as “El Vicentillo,” worked at his father’s side and acted as a surrogate for him in their logistical operations, authorities say.

Since the early 1990s, Vicente Zambada was responsible for supervising the unloading of cocaine from ships off the Mexican coast and verifying the quantities delivered by Colombian traffickers, according to the Washington indictment. The cocaine was smuggled across the Mexican border at Ciudad Juarez and shipped on to Chicago, Los Angeles and New York.

In June 1994, the younger Zambada was barely 19 when Colombian drug traffickers delivered 1,400 kilograms of cocaine to him and his associates in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, according to the indictment.

In 1995, Vicente Zambada and his father met with Colombian traffickers at a ranch in Sinaloa, Mexico, to discuss continued drug shipments, that indictment says.

The Washington indictment says Vicente Zambada also was involved in a 1,200-kilogram shipment in 1997 and was at a major drug negotiation in Mexico City in 1998.

After he pleaded guilty this summer to the Washington indictment, that case was transferred to federal court in Chicago, where he's to be arraigned next month. His father, also charged in the Chicago and Washington cases, remains a fugitive.

Vicente Zambada initially was held at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in downtown Chicago and was considered a major risk for escape or assassination. He was moved to a federal prison in Milan, Michigan. His current whereabouts aren't being made public.

In Mexico, he was protected by the "ubiquitous presence" of "military-caliber weapons," according to court papers filed in Chicago, and living like a playboy, with stylish clothes and fancy cars — a real "narco junior." By contrast, his father and El Chapo weren't flashy, dressing in the garb of the mountains where they grew up, sources say.



A sketch of fugitive drug lord Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada Garcia released by the Mexican government. | AP

Still, “El Vicentillo” was dangerous, according to authorities.

They point to a 2008 meeting with Chicago drug trafficker Margarito Flores, who traveled to El Chapo’s mountaintop lair. Vicente Zambada asked Flores to help the Sinaloa cartel acquire “big, powerful weapons” for an attack on a U.S. or Mexican government building in Mexico City, court papers say.

“We don’t want Middle Eastern or Asian guns, we want big U.S. guns or [rocket-propelled grenades],” authorities say he told Flores. “We don’t need one, we need a lot of them.”

The attack never happened, authorities say.

Vicente Zambada even met secretly with agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration in Mexico City, according to court records. After his arrest, he claimed he was given immunity to provide them with information about the drug trade. Government officials said there was no *quid pro quo*.

In 2015, [Margarito Flores and his twin brother Pedro Flores](#) were sentenced to 14 years each in prison for trafficking tons of cocaine to Chicago, along with heroin. They're serving their sentences in an undisclosed location. Zambada and the Flores brothers pleaded guilty to charges in the same Chicago indictment.

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