

In Mexico, a Fugitive's Arrest Captivates the Cameras

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MEXICO CITY, Oct. 11 — A woman who succeeds in a field dominated by men is always intriguing to the public, but when that field happens to be big-time cocaine trafficking, and the woman is graced with both charm and beauty, a criminal celebrity is born.

Ms. Ávila Beltrán, left, has a long list of romantic conquests, the police say, including the drug trafficker Ismael Zambada, right.

Ever since her arrest last month, Sandra Ávila Beltrán, better known as the Queen of the Pacific, has been getting the kind of press here that would have made Jesse James envious. Mexicans are closely following the case against her and the efforts to extradite her to United States, where she is wanted in Florida.

Prosecutors here say Ms. Ávila Beltrán, a shapely, raven-haired, 46-year-old with a taste for high fashion, has played an important role in forging a federation of drug traffickers in western Sinaloa State as well as creating an alliance between them and Colombian suppliers.

Along the way, she seduced many drug kingpins and upper-echelon police officers, becoming a powerful force in the cocaine world through a combination of ruthless business sense, a mobster's wiles and her sex appeal, prosecutors say.

It is a measure of her importance in the Mexican underworld that some Tijuana musicians have written a song in her honor. This "narco-corrido" extols her virtues as "a top lady who is a key part of the business." It has been played over and over on radio stations since her arrest.

The police say Ms. Ávila Beltrán was born into the trade. She is the niece of Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, an important trafficker from Guadalajara serving a long sentence for smuggling and the murder of an American drug-enforcement agent, Enrique Camarena. Another uncle is Juan José Quintero Payán, who was extradited to the United States recently on drug smuggling charges. Her list of romantic conquests, the police say, include important members of the Sinaloa cartel like Ismael Zambada, known as El Mayo, and Ignacio Coronel, known as Nacho, investigators say. Both remain powerful leaders in the Sinaloa organization.

Her lovers have fared better than her legal husbands. She was at one time married to José Luis Fuentes, the commander of the federal police in Sinaloa, who was executed gangland style. Later she married Rodolfo López Amavizca, the commander of the National Institute

for the Combat Against Drugs, which is now defunct. He was also murdered in 2000 by a gunman in a hotel in Hermosillo, the capital of northwestern Sonora State.

Of all her love affairs, however, it was her longtime union with a reputed Colombian trafficker, Juan Diego Espinosa, who calls himself the Tiger, that cemented her position in the upper echelons of the Mexican underworld.

Together, the two of them forged deals between Mexican and Colombian traffickers in the late 1990s and in 2000. She took control of shipping cocaine from the North Valley Cartel in Colombia to ports in western [Mexico](#), thus earning her name the Queen of the Pacific.

At the same time, Ms. Ávila Beltrán established several legitimate businesses that investigators suspect were used to launder money — a string of tanning salons and a thriving real estate company with more than 200 properties in Sonora State.

But her luck began to run out in December 2001, when the authorities seized a tuna boat, the Macel, in the port of Manzanillo and found more than nine tons of cocaine aboard, worth \$80 million.

Six months later, her teenage son was kidnapped in Guadalajara, and she slipped up. She contacted the authorities for help. She eventually asked the police to stay out of the way, handled the negotiations with the kidnappers herself and got her son back after 17 days.

But prosecutors say the \$5 million ransom request raised their suspicions about her income. They started investigating her, and by July 2002 had found evidence linking her to the Macel shipment. They also linked her to other members of Mr. Espinosa's family, among them a woman who was arrested at the Mexico City airport carrying about \$1.5 million, prosecutors say.

Ms. Ávila Beltrán eluded arrest and went underground. She lived quietly in Mexico City with Mr. Espinosa in a middle-class neighborhood and went by the name Daniela García Chavez.

She did not drop her taste for luxury. She was fond of dining at Chez Wok, an expensive Thai restaurant in the Polanco neighborhood. She drove a [BMW](#) and frequented hair salons favored by television celebrities.

In March 2004, she was indicted on separate drug smuggling charges in Miami along with several members of the Espinosa family, according to court documents. But United States agents made no headway toward her arrest, even though she was living a high-profile lifestyle in Mexico City, court documents said.

Eventually, last year, a United States judge ordered arrest warrants for two other defendants be quashed in an effort to get them to cooperate and help to locate Ms. Ávila Beltrán. The judge pointed out that she had been a fugitive in Mexico for years.

On Sept. 28, more than 30 Mexican federal agents swarmed into a diner where she was having coffee and arrested her. She coolly asked the agents to let her freshen her makeup before the police filmed her transfer to jail. On the videotape, she tosses her hair and smiles for the camera, strutting in tight jeans and spiked heels, on the arm of an agent.

In a later tape of her being questioned by the police, she describes herself as a housewife who earns a little money on the side “selling clothes, houses.” Asked why she had been arrested, she responds with nonchalance: “Because of an extradition order to the United States.”

Though some local press reports said the federal case against her was weak, a judge last week ordered her arrested. She responded with her trademark insouciance at a hearing where charges related to the Macel shipment were recited for the record. “I already know them by heart,” she noted.

Her life behind bars at the Santa Martha Acatitla women’s prison in the capital has apparently not been to her liking. She filed a complaint with a Mexico City human rights commission, saying her cell had insects, which she referred to as “noxious fauna.” She also said the ban on bringing in food from restaurants violated her rights.