

Vanilla

By Yolanda Aze

Vanilla ice cream, vanilla milkshake, vanilla flavoured biscuits and cakes, vanilla-scented candles - vanilla is one of the most popular flavours in the world and it is a flavour or scent that most of us will recognise. But what is vanilla and where does it come from? Real vanilla comes from the dried fruit of some orchids, most often the orchid *Vanilla planifolia*. This species is native to Central America and Mexico, but is now farmed in many other countries such as Madagascar, China, and Indonesia. It was first used by the Aztec people to flavour cocoa.

In the wild, vanilla plants are pollinated by bees and hummingbirds but when vanilla plants are farmed, they need to be pollinated by hand. The fruits, which are called 'pods', take four weeks to develop. After the pods are picked, they are soaked in hot water and then left to dry for between two and six months before the seeds in the pods are ready to be used. This process is very expensive, which is why most vanilla flavouring today is man-made, coming from synthetic sources rather than plants. After saffron, vanilla is the next most expensive spice.



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Vanilla planifolia is an orchid, which grows in tropical forests. It is a vine that can reach up to 30m in length.



Vanilla is a very popular scent for use in scented candles.



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The vanilla plant produced long fruit pods, which look like runner beans. These dried fruit pods are the vanilla pods from which the flavour is extracted. Inside the pods are thousands of tiny black seeds, sometimes visible in richly-flavoured vanilla ice-cream.

Vanilla in Food

In cooking, vanilla is considered a spice. The main vanilla flavour is in the seeds, though the pod also has flavour. Vanilla sugar can be made by putting a vanilla pod into a jar of sugar for a couple of weeks.

Vanilla flavour is usually found in the baking section of supermarkets. **Vanilla essence** is a synthetically produced vanilla flavouring while **Vanilla extract** is produced from soaking vanilla pods in a solution of ethyl alcohol and water.

Most things we eat that are vanilla-flavoured are not made using real vanilla but with synthetic flavouring.



Vanilla extract.