



VANILLA

Vanilla planifolia (syn. *V. fragrans*.) *

Vanilla pompona

Vanilla tahitiensis

* most common commercial variety, also known as Bourbon vanilla



Family Orchidaceae

History

Native to Central America the first recorded use of vanilla was by the Aztecs (in drink made with cacao beans is called *Cacahuatl*). The Spanish explorer Cortez is credited with introducing vanilla (and chocolate) to Spain in the 1520s. The demand for vanilla spread throughout Europe. Plants grown in any country other than Mexico would only flower. It was not until the 1840s when a method was discovered to hand pollinate the flowers, that countries other than Mexico could grow vanilla pods. Up until then it was only the bees of the *Melipona* genus, native to Mexico that pollinated the vanilla flowers. Hand pollinating is still used today for all commercial production of vanilla –from Mexico, Tahiti, Madagascar, Réunion, Indonesia and Tonga.



Description/Cultivation

Vanilla is a perennial climbing vine grown from cuttings which require support of trees or poles. It only grows in hot moist tropical climates and prefers shade. (It does not like full sun). The plant has long, leathery, fleshy, oval leaves on stout stems and will grow 30-50 ft (9-15 m). It is kept pruned in commercial operations. The first crop occurs in the third year. Yellow flowers (pictured above) are short lived so there is a small window of viability to hand pollinate. (Flowers open early in the morning). If successful, long aromatic pods form in 5-6 weeks. It takes approx 6 months for pods to mature on vine before harvesting the pods. In commercial productions the pods are then sweated and heated (fermentation curing process) and dried. Once dried, the vanilla beans are conditioned and stored for up to 6 months to develop fragrance then sorted by quality and graded (by size, colour, appearance/feel and moisture content). Vines fruit for up to 10 years. The dried, cured fruit pod is known as the vanilla bean (pictured above). Each bean contains thousands of tiny black vanilla seeds. Vanilla beans will keep for 2 years if stored away from the light in an airtight container.

Interesting facts:

- Vanilla is the second most expensive herb/spice in the world (after saffron).
- The word Vanilla derives from the Spanish word *vaina*, meaning “little pod”.
- The flowers have only a slight scent - no element of the vanilla flavour or aroma.
- Vanillin is the major component of the characteristic vanilla smell and flavour but it is just one of between 170-200 identified aromatic components of natural vanilla.

Properties:

- Historically vanilla is used as an aphrodisiac, tonic for virility and fertility, relieves stress and tiredness; aid to digestion – relieves gastric complaints , treats hysteria, relieves fever and is a nerve stimulant.
- Not widely used medicinally today. Medical research on vanillin the areas of anti-carcinogenic, sickle cell anaemia, impotency, anti-depressant, sedative are ongoing and some studies have shown that vanilla has antimicrobial and antioxidant activities.

Uses Culinary (whole pod, pure extract/essence, powder, and paste – see below), commercial flavouring (e.g. ice cream and soft drinks), cosmetics (especially perfume), tobacco, liqueurs, pharmaceutical (colouring agent).

Culinary: See over the page for some interesting recipes using vanilla.

- Store whole pods in sugar/castor sugar (for at least 2 weeks) before using in desserts and cakes for a vanilla flavour.
- Gently simmer whole beans in liquid (fruit juice/milk /alcohol) – use flavoured liquid in sauces, custards, ice cream and desserts. (can re-use bean if rinsed and dried each time)
- How to make your own vanilla extract: Chop beans finely and infuse in 35% alcohol for 2 weeks, filter out pieces of beans, and use the liquid for flavouring.
- Word of caution: Watch out for artificial vanilla which contains synthetic vanillin produced from paper-pulp by product.

Other uses:

- Sprinkle powdered beans over notepaper for an attractive scent.
- Use broken vanilla beans in a culinary potpourri with star anise, cloves, bay leaf, cinnamon, rosemary, dried orange peel and juniper berries.
- To restore lost energy and improve the mind, carry a vanilla bean.
- Place some vanilla essence in a small lid or saucer to get rid of odours in your fridge or car.

Sources: Claire Loewenfeld and Philippa Back (1974) *The Complete Book of Herbs & Spices* AH&AW Reed; Isabell Shipard (2011) *How Can I Use Herbs in my Daily Life* (5th Ed) David Stewart, 2011; Scott Cunningham (2009) *Cunningham's Encyclopedia & Magical Herbs* Llewellyn; Susanna Lyle (2009) *Discovering vegetables herbs & spices* Csiro; <http://foodmatters.tv/articles-1/the-healing-power-of-spices>; http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanilla#Artificial_vanilla; <http://www.kew.org/science-conservation/plants-fungi/vanilla-planifolia-vanilla>

RAW BLUEBERRY CHIA JAM - reproduced with the permission of Lauren Glucina <http://ascensionkitchen.com>

2 cups frozen blueberries
 2 tablespoons raw, wild honey
 2 tablespoons chia seeds* (or you can use psyllium husks to swell and bind)
 2 teaspoons vanilla paste

Let the blueberries thaw out a little. Combine everything in the food processor and blitz till well combined. Transfer to a glass jar and let set in the fridge for a little, the chia will swell up and give it that jam-like texture. Spread it on toast or get creative and layer it in a fruit parfait.

Makes 1 heaped cup.

SCOTCH FILLET STEAK WITH CHILI-VANILLI SAUCE - reproduced with permission from *Vanilla Table* by Natasha MacAller (Bateman, 2013).

3 large (15g) garlic cloves, peeled & minced 2-3 (45g) red jalapeño or chilli peppers, seeds optional, minced
 ½ cup (100g) palm sugar or brown sugar 1 vanilla pod, split and scraped
 ½ cup (120 ml) water 1 Tbsp (15 ml) lime juice and zest of ½
 2 kaffir lime leaves 1 tsp fish sauce
 2 tsp fine sea salt 1 Tbsp (15 ml) rice wine vinegar

4 scotch fillet or rib eye steaks (22g g ea) 2 Tbsp (30 ml) oil for coating steaks
 Salt to season for the grill (to taste) To serve: 1 cup (85g) coriander/cilantro for garnish

Chili-vanilli sauce

Combine the garlic, jalapeño (seeds optional), sugar, vanilla pod and seeds, water, lime juice and zest, lime leaves, fish sauce and salt in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Lower the heat and simmer until the mixture begins to thicken and the garlic and pepper bits begin to soften. After about 3 minutes, whisk in vinegar and allow to cool completely. Remove lime leaves and transfer the vanilla pod to a tall bottle. Using a funnel, fill the bottle with the sauce and refrigerate. Will keep refrigerated for 2 weeks.

Scotch fillet steak:

Heat a barbecue flat-top grill or a skillet to high. Pat steaks dry, then brush both sides with oil. Season with salt and sear on the first side, without moving the steak, over high heat about 3 minutes. Flip over and cook an additional 5–7 minutes. Remove steaks from heat and rest 5 minutes.

To finish and serve:

Thinly slice steaks against the grain and fan onto plate.
 Drizzle with warmed chili-vanilli sauce and a scattering of coriander if wished.

The information provided herein is for informational purposes only and is not intended as a substitute for advice from a Medicinal Herbalist or other health care professional.