

It has been nicknamed “black gold,” and is the world’s second most precious spice, following saffron. Indigenous to Mexico, *vanilla planifolia* was likely used by the Totonac tribe 1,000 years ago as a flavoring and to pay tribute to the Emperor of the Aztecs. Totonac lore tells that Xanat, daughter of the Mexican fertility goddess, loved a young Totonac man. Unable to marry a mortal, the goddess transformed herself into a plant that would provide the sensual pleasure and happiness to humans she couldn’t. Local people in the region still celebrate the end of the vanilla harvest with dances and feasts in her honor, and the aphrodisiac quality of vanilla continues to exert its magical influence on aromatic dishes the world over.

A STAR THROUGH THE AGES

The vanilla bean, a dark, wrinkled pod the length and width of an ordinary string bean, is actually the seedpod of the climbing, vanilla orchid. This species blooms only once a year, and the flower remains open for a single day. During that 24-hour period, it must be pollinated, a process performed by a tiny bee, the Melipone, native only to the vanilla growing regions of Mexico. Harvested just as they turn from green to yellow, the beans are dried in the sun to preserve their precious oils, then bundled in blankets or ovens or sweating boxes, after which they are hung in the sun to cure and develop their lustrous, almost-black hue.

It is believed the Spanish Conquistador, Herman Cortez, met with the Emperor Montezuma while seeking treasures in the New World, and observed him enjoying a beverage of vanilla-scented chocolate, *chocolatl* (also called *tlilxochitl*, which means “black flower.”) When he returned to Europe, Cortez carried with him the riches of Montezuma’s slain empire — gold, silver, jewels... and bags of cocoa and vanilla. The Spanish derived the word *vainilla*, meaning “small sheath” from the Latin word for the female sexual organ. In short time, Spanish factories were turning out vanilla-seasoned chocolate, and thus Europe’s introduction to vanilla began as chocolate’s mate. It was Queen Elizabeth’s apothecary, Hugh Morgan, who began to use vanilla as a flavoring of its own around 1602. Vanilla soared in popularity, becoming more famous than chocolate or any other flavoring before or since. For 300 years after Cortez first introduced it, vanilla was produced only in its native Mexico. A Belgian, Charles Morren, identified that ordinary insects weren’t able to pollinate the orchid, and developed a method of hand-pollinating the blossoms. As vanilla spread to French colonies in the Indian Ocean and Oceania, it eventually

landed on Reunion, an island off Madagascar. There, a former slave named Edmond Albius perfected a precise but simple pollination method using a wisp of bamboo, a technique still employed today. The Dutch introduced vanilla to Indonesia, the English to southern India, and vanilla had wound its way into every region with the climate, patience and passion to cultivate it.

HOT COMMODITY

Seventy-five percent of the world’s vanilla supply still comes from the area around Madagascar, whose vanilla, along with that grown in Indonesia and the areas around the Indian Ocean, is referred to as Bourbon, though it is actually a derivative of the original, Mexican stock. French Polynesia, which produces the world’s most prized and most expensive vanilla (up to \$350 per pound), welcomed the plant courtesy of a French admiral in 1848. Recognized for its floral, tropical bouquet, Tahitian vanilla contains unusually high amounts of heliotropin (a plant-

derived chemical, often possessing healing properties), intensified in the Pacific sun, and is considered its own species.

VANILLA IN FLORIDA

With such an exotic life story, it is surprising that vanilla is a term denoting something plain and banal. On the contrary, vanilla is one of the most intoxicating substances humans enjoy, lending itself to everything from aromatherapy candles and bath oils, to fragrances such as Thierry Mugler’s Angel and Attraction by Lancome, to favorite desserts such as custards, creams and pastries. Though it is best known as a flavoring for sweets, vanilla has infinite, gustatory uses, evident on numerous Florida menus. One need venture no further than the bar at many restaurants to sip the riches of vanilla. Blue Martini Lounge — with locations in Tampa, West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale and Orlando — offers a number of cocktails blended with vanilla-kissed vodkas, including the caramel martini (Three Olives vanilla vodka, butterscotch schnapps and Amarula ▸

Vanilla Shine martini, Shine at The Shelbourne Hotel, Miami Beach



Sun-dried and cured vanilla beans



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cream liqueur) and the espresso martini (Grey Goose vanilla vodka, Kahlua, Bailey's Irish Cream and espresso syrup). Shine at the Shelbourne Hotel in Miami Beach offers a \$15 version made with Absolut Vanilla, Godiva White Chocolate Liqueur and Frangelico that's garnished with a crushed vanilla bean rim.

Many restaurants call on vanilla's allure at the onset of the menu, beckoning with appetizers, such as an amuse bouche at Orlando's Victoria and Albert of lobster with bok choy in a vanilla cream sauce, or the deliciously punishing "Death by Foie Gras" at the Beach Bistro on Ana Maria Island: seared Hudson Valley foie gras on brioche bread pudding garnished with a vanilla bean and Sauternes reduction, nutmeg Anglaise and an aged balsamic reduction. Fish Out of Water in Watercolor, too, sets its foie gras up on a

sizzling, vanilla date, serving it with roasted pineapple and mango-vanilla gastrique (a classic French sweet & sour, essentially fat free sauce.)

And, since vanilla is clearly wise enough to hold its own in the headiest company, Chef Marty Blitz Tampa's Mise en Place, serves his award-winning grilled duck breast with a raspberry-cardamom-vanilla bean sauce. At Cuvée Beach in Destin, a Chinese five-spice duck confit crepe comes plated in a vanilla broth. At her eponymous restaurant in Key West, Chef Alice Weingarten infuses her pan-roasted chicken in Tahitian vanilla and pairs it with wild mushroom mashed potatoes for an earthy and mysterious taste journey. At Miami Beach's Tantra restaurant, the aphrodisiac menu has recently made way for lobster with vanilla and lavender. "Lobster and vanilla are naturally compatible," says chef Sandee Birdsong. Chef

James Wierzelewski of VIX at the Hotel Victor in Miami Beach serves his pan-seared diver scallops with orange vanilla vinaigrette, enriching the natural sweetness of the shellfish, while mutually offsetting it with a citrus tang. Juliana Gonzalez, newly promoted to chef de cuisine at Mosaico, included a roasted lamb shoulder with vanilla potatoes and grapefruit on her Valentine's Day, aphrodisiac prix fixe menu.

Next time that first whiff of a warm crème brûlée reaches your nostrils — with its unmistakable, sweet but not-too-sweet vanilla perfume — let your mind wander to visions of a love-struck goddess, to rare, demanding flowers, and to a withered, unassuming bean that has inspired nothing short of mad lust for over a thousand years. Bask in the flavor of a true, exotic wonder. □

Tahitian vanilla chicken, Alice's, Key West



Mediterranean sea bass with vanilla oil, Vita, Miami Beach



Trio of soufflés with vanilla extract, Two Chefs, South Miami



Vanilla scallops, Cuvée Beach, Destin

