

# Velvety Vanilla

*Discover the secrets to cooking with this versatile ingredient.*





## Catherine Torphy

**V**ANILLA IS A beloved flavor, evocative of childhood, ice cream and sweet temptations. Its smooth, rich taste and seductive aroma are integral to many of our favorite foods: chocolate, pudding, yogurt, drinks and desserts. Vanilla's familiarity, however, belies its exotic origins.

The name comes from the Spanish term, *vainilla*, or little sheath, which refers to the shape of the pods. Vanilla beans are native to the Americas, where the crop has been cultivated since ancient times. In the 1500s, Spanish conquistadors learned of vanilla from the Aztecs and subsequently brought it to Europe, where records indicate that it was being used to flavor chocolate a century later.

Today, vanilla is cultivated in tropical countries including Mexico, Tahiti and Madagascar, which is the number one producer. The U.S. is the world's largest consumer of vanilla. Many of us enjoy the smooth flavor on a weekly or even daily basis, without being aware of the time and labor involved in harvesting a single crop.

Vanilla is the edible fruit of a tropical orchid. Yet, commercially grown vanilla comes from the species *Vanilla planifolia*, the vines of which can climb up to 200 feet and take up to three years to flower. The flowers develop into long, thin green pods, or beans, which are tasteless and odorless. After they're picked, the beans go through a complex fermentation process lasting many months, which dries them out and turns them dark brown. The dried beans eventually become coated with a crystalline frosting of vanillin, which gives them their characteristic flavor and fragrance.

This labor-intensive process makes vanilla one of the most expensive spices in the world. Depending on the variety, a single bean can cost several dollars, which is why synthetic vanilla is often used as a substitution. While it's less expensive, synthetic vanilla lacks the subtle flavors and intensity of pure vanilla, and is no comparison to the real thing.



Creamed rice with pears

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If properly preserved, vanilla beans will last for several months. They can be used whole, crushed, chopped or split lengthwise to extract their tiny seeds. You can even use them to make your own vanilla extract. With a little extra time in the kitchen, vanilla beans will enhance the flavor and pleasure of your favorite dishes.

#### CHOCOLATE DROP SOUFFLÉ

1 cup milk  
½ cup confectioners' sugar, divided, plus extra for dusting  
1 vanilla bean, cut in ½ lengthwise  
¼ cup flour  
2½ tablespoons butter, plus extra for brushing  
2 egg yolks  
3 egg whites  
6 ounces bittersweet chocolate, roughly chopped

In a medium pan over low heat, combine the milk, ¼ cup sugar and vanilla bean.

Bring to a boil and remove from heat. Remove the vanilla bean. Add the flour and butter and mix until well combined. Transfer back to the stovetop and cook over low heat for another 5 minutes, stirring until smooth. Remove from the heat and add the egg yolks one at a time, mixing well after each one is added. Set aside to cool.

Using an electric mixer, beat the egg whites until soft peaks form. Add the remaining sugar and beat until stiff peaks form. Gently fold the egg whites into the milk mixture, being careful not to deflate the egg whites.

Preheat the oven to 350°. Lightly brush 6 single-serving soufflé dishes with butter and dust with sugar. Be sure to shake off any excess sugar. In the bottom of each dish, place some of the bittersweet chocolate. Fill each dish with the batter until they are about ¾ of the way full. Arrange the soufflé dishes in a deep oven-safe baking dish and add enough warm water until it comes about ½ way up the outside of each soufflé dish.

Transfer the soufflé dishes to the oven to bake for about 20 minutes. Remove from the oven, dust with confectioners' sugar and serve immediately. SERVES 6

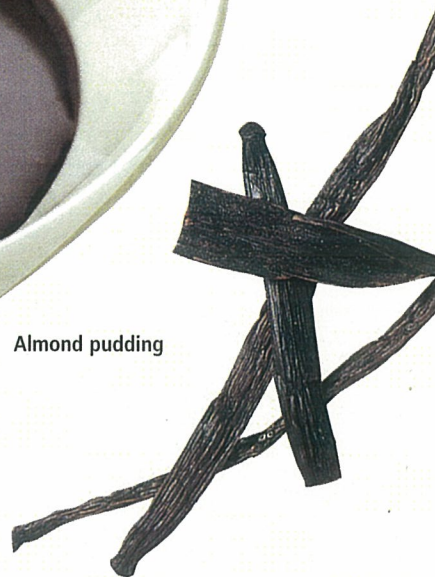
#### ALMOND PUDDING

4 tablespoons butter, plus extra for brushing  
1 vanilla bean, sliced in ½ lengthwise  
6 slices bread, crusts removed  
1 cup milk  
3 egg yolks  
1 egg  
¾ cup almond flour \*  
¼ cup flour  
½ cup sugar, divided  
¼ cup egg whites  
confectioners' sugar for dusting  
¾ cup bittersweet chocolate, grated  
2 tablespoons maraschino liqueur  
sliced almonds for garnish

In a small saucepan over low heat, combine the butter and vanilla bean. Cook just until the butter melts and remove the bean from



Almond pudding



Sweet "fondue" and skewers

the pan. Scrape out the pulp of the bean and add back into the pan. Remove from heat and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 350°. In a bowl, combine the bread slices with the milk and set aside to soak. Squeeze out any excess moisture from the bread slices and set aside. In a separate bowl, combine the bread slices with the egg yolks, egg, butter-vanilla mixture, both flours and  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup sugar. Mix until well combined and set aside. In a separate bowl, combine the egg whites with the remaining sugar and using an electric mixer, beat until stiff peaks form. Gently fold the whipped egg whites into the egg-flour mixture and mix until well combined. Lightly brush 6 cupcake molds with butter and dust with sugar. Shake off any excess sugar. Divide the

mixture evenly among the 6 molds, filling each about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the way full. Transfer to the oven to bake for about 25 minutes. Meanwhile, in a small skillet over low heat, combine the bittersweet chocolate,  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup water and the maraschino liqueur. Mix until a smooth sauce forms, remove from heat and set aside. Remove the puddings from the oven, unmold and set aside to cool. Divide the chocolate sauce among each of 6 shallow serving bowls. Place 1 pudding in the center of the sauce in each bowl and garnish with almond slices to serve. SERVES 6

#### CRISPY TEGOLINE WITH WHIPPED CREAM

*Tegoline are crisp, little "tile" shaped cookies.*

