

Vanilla and Its Uses During the Holidays



Enhance the flavor of your favorite recipes with aromatic vanilla beans.

Vanilla flavoring is a desirable sweet flavor that is used in many recipes from cookies and candies to drinks. Vanilla comes as an extract, powder and paste. These forms of vanilla come from beans that are grown on an orchid plant. Growers

pollinate the long pods and ferment them for about 6 months before harvesting. This laborious process results in the flavoring becoming one of the most expensive. To cook with vanilla beans, you simply split open the pod and scrape out the pulpy seeds inside. Each pod will have tiny seeds that have a strong vanilla aroma.

An imitation vanilla extract is made from synthetic flavorings with alcohol and may not be quite as desirable as an authentic vanilla flavor.

Vanilla beans take on the flavor and aroma from where they are grown. The most common types of beans are grown primarily in Madagascar, Mexico and Tahiti. The Madagascar bean (also known as a bourbon bean) is very thin and very rich in sweetness. The thick skin covers many small seeds that provide a strong vanilla aroma. This accounts for about 80 percent of most vanilla extract. The Mexican bean is not as thin or sweet as the Madagascar bean. This bean has an earthy aroma and is more mellow in flavor. The Tahiti bean is plumper in size, darker in color and the least sweet of the beans. The perfect vanilla bean is 5 to 7 inches long and should feel moist and supple (not dry and brittle) when rolled between your fingers.

Fresh vanilla beans can be used in cooking as well as in making vanilla extract. One 2-inch piece of vanilla bean = 1 tsp. extract. Vanilla beans are made into an extract which is aged from 2 to 6 months and contains a minimum of 35 percent alcohol.

Vanilla beans will dry out and become brittle if left out in the air, so wrap them in foil, seal them in a zip-top bag and store them in a cool, dark area. They'll last this way for at least several months.

Enjoy the flavor and aroma of the fresh vanilla bean!

Vanilla Bean Custard

2 cups milk

2 vanilla bean pods
1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
1 egg
3 egg yolks
1/4 cup cornstarch

Bring milk to a simmer in a heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium heat. Add the vanilla beans from the bean pod (split the pod and scrape them out with the tip of a knife).

In a bowl whisk together the sugar, eggs, yolks and cornstarch until smooth. Slowly add about half of the milk to the egg mixture and then pour the egg mixture into the saucepan containing the rest of the milk. Don't heat the eggs too quickly or you will have scrambled eggs in your custard.

Place the pan over medium heat and whisk well, making sure you get in the corners of the pan, until it comes to a boil and thickens. Cool, cover and store in the fridge.

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