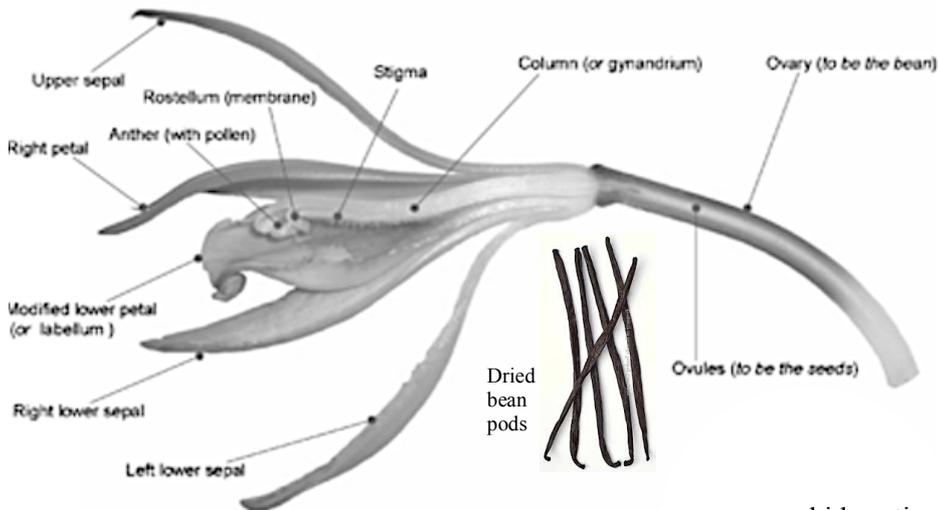


## Longitudinal section of a vanilla flower



## Vanilla

The vanilla bean, it's that culinary delight sold in delicatessens with an expensive price tag and looking like a shrivelled black strip of bridle leather with longitudinal ridges and indentations! If only you knew what's involved in producing this bean, you would appreciate more why it is the second most expensive spice in the world, next only to saffron!

The bean is the cured fruit of *Vanilla planifolia*, of the orchid family - yes, it is true - vanilla is an orchid, native to Mexico. The story of this plant is

fascinating. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish conquistador Herman Cortez met with Emperor Montezuma. He noticed that the Emperor enjoyed the royal drink 'xocolatl' made of cocoa beans, vanilla and honey. Cortez was so impressed by this drink that he took bags of cocoa and vanilla when he returned home. Soon after, the plant was imported into Spain, Europe, and then taken to Reunion, Mauritius and Madagascar by the French.

It grew with vigour in the new lands, the vines flowered but no fruit ever resulted! For some 300 years, this mystery was not solved, during which time vanilla was produced only in its native Mexico. Finally in 1836, Charles Morren, a Belgian botanist, discovered that without the melipone bees and certain species of hummingbirds only found in Mexico to pollinate the blossoms, nature could not take its course. Artificial pollination was the only answer! A former slave in Madagascar, Edmond Albius, perfected a quick and simple method of hand pollinating vanilla, which is still in use to this day. A small stick of bamboo, the size of a toothpick, is used to push aside the rostellum, and pollen is spread from stamen to stigma by causing contact between the two. This hand pollination accounts for the high labour cost in vanilla production.

The plant grows wild on the edge of the Mexican tropical forests. It is a climbing vine with thick, fleshy green stems producing a single long leathery leaf at each node together with its aerial roots clinging to the host tree. Under cultivation conditions, it is trained and pruned to a height that will allow hand pollination of the flowers and subsequent harvesting of the beans. The plant flowers once a year for about 2 months. The fragrant greenish-yellow flower grows in bunches, opens in the morning and never reopens. If fertilisation has been successful it remains on the rachis for 2 or 3 days, if not pollinated, it will wither and die. The fruits develop within 4 to 6 weeks and in between 6 to 9 months they begin to turn yellow at the bottom tip, indicating that they are ready for harvest. The fresh pods have no aroma. The 'vanilla' flavour results from the curing and drying process, which involves plunging the pods into hot steam before undergoing various stages of fermentation and drying, all taking up to 6 months. After that, the fruits will be covered in crystals of glucose and vanillin, become pliable and black from oxidization. These cured and dried pods keep almost indefinitely. Vanilla extract is made from crushed cured beans steeped in alcohol, sometimes with water and sugar added.

Other commercially cultivated members of the genus are West Indian vanilla (*V. pompona*) and Tahitian vanilla (*V. tahitensis*), their flavour is considered inferior to *V. planifolia*.

Vanilla has been considered an aphrodisiac from the time of the Aztecs. Mexican folklore has it that a young daughter of the Goddess of Fertility loved a human youth. As she could not marry him, she transformed herself into the vanilla orchid so that she could forever belong to her human love and his people.

Vanilla was once believed to be a febrifuge, used to reduce fevers, but now it is rarely used for any medicinal purposes other than as a pharmaceutical flavouring. Vanilla extract is used in massage oil, perfumes, incense, potpourri, candles, cigars and distillery.

In the home kitchen, let's clear up one thing. What some of us regularly buy in the supermarket is likely to be "imitation vanilla", a mixture mass-produced from synthetic substances, which imitate the vanilla flavour and smell. It is not in the same class as cured vanilla pod or true vanilla extract. It is a good idea to keep a cured pod in a jar of sugar ready to be used when needed. Top up with more sugar and the same pod will perfume the whole jar for a long while. When making custard, syrups and poached fruits, infuse the liquid with a vanilla pod and taste the difference! The same pod can be rinsed, dried and returned to an airtight container for further use. You can also split the bean and scrape out the tiny seeds to add a speckled look to custard, syrup and ice cream.

How about vanilla poached fruits for dessert tonight followed by hot vanilla chocolate for a nightcap?

'Bon appetit' and sweet dreams!