

June 2019

THE WONDER OF VANILLA:

Homemade Vanilla Extract

“Fish” in Parchment with Vegetables and Vanilla

Frozen Cranberry–Pineapple Salad

Vanilla –Orange Cordial

Vanilla Syrup

It is thought that the vanilla orchid was first cultivated by the Totonac people of Mexico. A taste for vanilla firmly took hold of the Aztecs who conquered the Totonacs and they named the revered dried black fruit *tlilxochitl*, “black flower.” When the Spanish *conquistadores* met up with the Aztecs, they too fell for the taste of vanilla. They called it *vainilla*, “little pod.” Hernán Cortés introduced both the “little pods” and chocolate to Europe when he returned to Spain from Mesoamerica in the 1520s. However, it was not until 1841 that the cultivation of the vanilla orchid allowed for the culinary march of this precious flavoring. Since a specific mountain bee, local to Mexico and Central America, was the exclusive natural pollinator, a method for pollination had to be devised or its global adventure would never have been successful. A method for hand-pollination was developed by Edmond Albius, a twelve-year-old slave on the Island of Réunion. Réunion, formerly known as Bourbon, is one of the French-held Mascarene Islands in the Indian Ocean. The designation of some vanilla products as Bourbon vanilla references this historical footnote. The propagation of three highly sustainable species, derived from the original *V. planifolia*, have allowed the vanilla orchid to prosper outside of Mesoamerica but in a narrow climate band. The labor intensive nature of cultivation keeps the cost of pure vanilla extract and whole dried fruits (vanilla beans or pods) high, second only to saffron.



Methyl or ethyl vanillin is the chemical base for artificial vanilla flavoring which is synthesized from lignin, a polymer found in wood. It is a highly profitable byproduct of wood pulp processing during which lignin is broken down by the action of sulfiting agents. I have read that artificial vanilla flavoring allows for the quantity of vanilla ice cream available to American consumers. The article suggested that the high price of pure vanilla is not the reason that manufacturers choose to use artificial vanilla flavoring; there just could never be enough pure vanilla to satisfy our love of vanilla ice cream. Add to that, the passion for vanilla yogurt. An inexpensive, artificial vanilla flavoring is also simulated using castoreum, from the scent glands of mature beavers. It has been approved by the FDA as a food additive and need not be identified on a food label specifically; it can be grouped with other dubious additives as “natural flavoring,” a catch-all designation not very helpful to vegetarians who want to know the source of the ingredients they consume. It is often the “vanilla” flavoring included in the “natural flavoring” of commercial baked products. In recent years, due to the preceding information and the rising cost of pure vanilla extract, I have been

making my own vanilla extract using whole vanilla beans or pods. They do not market “artificial” vanilla fruits so I know what I am making is pure vanilla extract. I am also pleased with the added bonus that my homemade double-strength vanilla extract cost about one-half that of double-strength vanilla extract available from online spice firms. A recipe for homemade vanilla extract appears in volume II of *A Worldwide Vegetarian Journey to Discover the Foods That Nourish America’s Immigrant Soul* on p. 426 but I will violate my rule and repeat it in this column because it is just too important a recipe.

We all have baking recipes and creamy dessert recipes that call for vanilla extract but vanilla can add incredible nuances to some savory dishes which will surprise, and, yes, please.



HOMEMADE VANILLA EXTRACT

TPT - 2 weeks and 55 minutes;
45 minutes = cooling period;
2 weeks = flavor development period

I have always added half of a vanilla bean to a bottle of pure vanilla extract. It is a useful way to use up a slightly too-dry vanilla bean that has lost its way in a spice storage bin. It is also an economical way to create a double-strength vanilla extract from a single-strength product. Making your own vanilla extract is simple and very satisfying.

1 fresh vanilla bean

3/4 cup vodka

Prepare a Pyrex measuring cup and a small condiment jar with lid by washing and drying well. Set a canning funnel into the measuring cup. Set a funnel into the condiment jar.

Split the vanilla bean and scrape all the seeds into the measuring cup. Set aside briefly.

In a saucepan set over *MEDIUM* heat, heat vodka until *hot*, but *not boiling*. Pour into measuring cup with vanilla seeds. Allow to cool to room temperature, about 45 minutes. Transfer the cooled vodka and vanilla seeds into the condiment jar. Seal and store at room temperature for two weeks, agitating gently each day to continue the release of flavor from the seeds.



Set a sieve over a clean measuring cup. Agitate infusion vigorously and pour into the sieve to remove any pod pieces. Return strained vanilla extract to condiment jar. *Don't worry about small seeds, they will continue to flavor.**

Store in cupboard, away from heat. The extract will keep indefinitely.

Yields 3/4 cupful

Notes: *The seeds can be strained from the extract, if desired, but the seeds continue to increase the intensity of the extract for some time if left in the jar.

Calories from the alcohol are lost when the vodka is boiled. Therefore, the residual carbohydrate value of the vanilla extract, albeit small, will vary from batch to batch.

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## “FISH” IN PARCHMENT WITH VEGETABLES AND VANILLA

TPT - 1 hour and 8 minutes

*I have sensed vanilla and discovered vanilla pods in the most surprising ingredient combinations over the years—parceled with pork loin and sausages, rising from a small dish of pickled pineapple, perfuming onions, and enhancing fish and seafood. Parchment-wrapped fishless fish can be gussied-up with a touch of vanilla too.*

**4 frozen, breaded, soy “fishless fish” filets**

**1 teaspoon *extra virgin* olive oil**

**1 teaspoon butter**

**1 medium leek—trimmed, well-rinsed, *thinly* sliced,  
and well-rinsed again**

**1/4 cup *finely* chopped carrot**

**1/4 cup *finely* chopped fennel**

**1/4 cup chopped broccolini flower heads**

**2 tablespoons Sea Broth\* *or* vegetarian stock of choice**

**1 teaspoon *tamari* soy sauce**

**1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice**

**1/4 teaspoon powdered kelp, or other seaweed of choice**

**Freshly ground black pepper, to taste**

**2 three-inch pieces of vanilla pod—split open\*\***



Preheat oven to 325 degrees F. Cut four large squares of culinary parchment paper—approximately 12-14 inches square. On the counter or table, stack two squares together for each serving.

Using a very sharp knife, trim the breading from each filet. Place two in the center of each parchment square.

In a skillet set over *LOW-MEDIUM* heat, heat oil and butter. Add leek slices, *finely* chopped carrot and fennel, and broccolini. Allow vegetables to gently sweat, stirring frequently, until soft.

Add stock, soy sauce, lemon juice, powdered kelp, and black pepper. Stir to combine. Spoon over filets, dividing it between the packets.

Place a piece of vanilla pod in each packet. Fold parchment over into tight bundles. Place on baking sheet. Bake in preheated 325 degree F. oven for 40 minutes.



Trim packets, if necessary, to make it easier for diners to eat from parchment. Run a sharp knife across the top of each to make it easy for diners to open the packets.

*Serve at once.*

Yields 2 individual servings

Notes: \*My recipe for sea broth can be found on p. 411 of volume II of *A Worldwide Vegetarian Journey to Discover the Foods That Nourish America's Immigrant Soul*.

\*\*Since I always add dry vanilla pods to the jar where my next batch of vanilla extract is aging, I always have pieces of pod that can be used for dishes like this.

This recipe can be doubled or tripled, when required.

1/2 SERVING – PROTEIN = 10.1 g.; FAT = 13.9 g.; CARBOHYDRATE = 19.5 g.;  
CALORIES = 246; CALORIES FROM FAT = 51%

## FROZEN CRANBERRY – PINEAPPLE SALAD WITH SOUR CREAM

TPT - 8 hours and 9 minutes;  
8 hours = freezing period

*Frozen salads reached an exciting, almost giddy, zenith in the early 1950s, as the new post-war toy, the freezer at the top of the refrigerator, challenged the homemaker to think of something besides the new little boxes of Birdseye frozen vegetables or those dreadful rennet frozen dessert mixes to fill the tiny cold compartments. Pints of good ice cream from the dairy fit in the compartments only if you took out the ice cube trays. Space for half-gallons and those big round gallon containers was yet to come. It has always amazed me that the frozen fruit salad and dessert concoctions were all but forgotten when the large, reliable refrigerator freezer came into every home, except by my mom who had a dozen such recipes. This recipe only came back into our repertoire with the availability of reduced-fat sour cream.*

**1 cup whole cranberry sauce**  
**1/2 cup juice-packed crushed pineapple—well-drained**  
**Pinch ground allspice, or to taste**  
**Pinch ground ginger, or to taste**

**1/2 cup light dairy sour cream**  
**1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract**

**4 lettuce leaves—preferably red romaine—**  
**well-washed and thoroughly dried**

**2 tablespoons coarsely chopped, additive-free pecans**  
**—toasted—for garnish**

Prepare a **5 1/2 x 3 x 2-inch non-stick-coated loaf pan** by placing it in the freezer until required.

In a mixing bowl, combine cranberry sauce, *well-drained* crushed pineapple, and ground allspice and ginger. Mix well.

Using a wire whisk, beat vanilla extract into sour cream.

Add sour cream to fruit mixture. Using a rubber spatula, fold sour cream thoroughly into fruit mixture. Pour mixture into chilled loaf pan. Spread evenly. Cover tightly with aluminum foil. Freeze overnight or until firm—about 8 hours.

Arrange lettuce leaves on individual salad plates.\*

When ready to serve, turn frozen salad out onto a cutting board. Cut frozen block into four wedge-shaped pieces. Transfer a wedge to each of the lettuce-lined salad plates. Garnish each with a sprinkling of *toasted* pecan pieces.

*Serve at once.*

Yields 4 individual servings

Notes: \*When served as a dessert, omit lettuce.



This recipe can also be frozen in small ramekins, which is especially nice when served as a dessert. When doubling, use a 7 x 3 x 2-inch non-stick-coated loaf pan.

If this is to be frozen for several days or if less than four servings are required, wrap the entire pan with several layers of aluminum foil to reduce the formation of ice crystals.

1/4 SERVING – PROTEIN = 2.7 g.; FAT = 6.8 g.; CARBOHYDRATE = 25.9 g.;  
CALORIES = 173; CALORIES FROM FAT = 35%

## VANILLA – ORANGE CORDIAL

TPT - 2 weeks and 50 minutes;  
30 minutes = syrup cooling period;  
2 weeks = flavor development period

*Of course you can go to your local wine and spirits store and pick up an orange liqueur for a special occasion but imagine how proud you would be to offer an icy cold cordial glass of a cordial you actually made yourself with the vanilla extract that you made yourself. Ray created his limoncello to the cheers of all so I created a vanilla cordial to offer as well and I make enough so that I can offer a bottle as a gift. It is smooth and ultimately satisfying after a holiday dinner as long as you use the very best Russian vodka. It makes a difference, so don't take a chance on a cheap vodka and don't leave the cinnamon stick in for more than one day.*

**1 large vanilla pod**

**1 3/4 cups sugar**

**3 cups water**

**1 organic orange—very well-scrubbed**

**1 bottle (750 milliliters) (3 1/4 cups) 80-proof**

**Russian or Finnish vodka**

**One 1/2-inch cinnamon stick**

Cut the vanilla bean crosswise in half. While holding the pod over a white plate, split each half open to expose seeds. Using a knife, scrape seeds onto plate. Scrape seeds and pod pieces into a large saucepan.

Add sugar and water. Stir. Over *MEDIUM-HIGH* heat, bring sugar mixture to the boil while stirring constantly. Allow to boil for 2 minutes. *Immediately remove from heat* and allow to cool to room temperature—about 30 minutes.

Using a sharp vegetable peeler, peel the zest from the orange in long spirals. Using a very sharp knife, carefully cut off any large areas of the bitter pith that is still attached to the zest spirals.

In a large jar, combine cooled vanilla sugar syrup, vodka, the cinnamon stick, and the orange zest spirals. Cover with plastic wrap or a sterilized cork and refrigerate for 1 day. *Remove only cinnamon stick.* Recover and refrigerate for 2 weeks to allow for full flavor development. *Remove orange zest.*

Sterilize decorative cordial bottles and corks.

Strain cordial through culinary cheesecloth into sterilized bottles. Drop a piece of vanilla pod into each bottle to intensify the vanilla flavor, if you wish, and seal with a sterilized cork.

*Store in the refrigerator or freezer, if preferred.*



Serve into cordial glasses. *This cordial should be icy cold when served.*

Yields about 6 1/4 cupfuls

1/33 SERVING (i. e., 3 tablespoonfuls) –  
PROTEIN = 0.0 g.; FAT = 0.0 g.; CARBOHYDRATE = 5.1 g.;  
CALORIES = 42; CALORIES FROM FAT = 0%; CALORIES FROM ALCOHOL = 47%

## VANILLA SYRUP

TPT - 2 weeks and 51 minutes;  
30 minutes = syrup cooling period;  
2 weeks (at least) = flavor infusion period

*In one of my baking catalogs I found vanilla syrup offered at \$12.95 for 12.7 ounces. “Ludicrous,” said I. Vanilla beans are not inexpensive but one pod could give you a quart of this wonderful syrup. While it is cooling, the release from the vanilla beans fills the kitchen. Wow, and you have to wait two weeks for the full effect? It is a lovely touch for a fruit dessert or as a dip for great big, ripe berries or as a sauce for scoops of ricotta cheese. I also find this syrup useful if I should have day-old cake, bakery pound cake, or cakes from the freezer. I simply brush sauce over them to add moisture and flavor.*



**1 cup sugar**  
**1 cup water**  
**2 tablespoons honey—preferably, wildflower honey**

**1/2 of a vanilla pod—broken into two pieces**

Sterilize two jelly jars, lids and rings.

In a saucepan set over *MEDIUM-HIGH* heat, combine sugar, water, and honey. Cook, stirring constantly, until sugar is dissolved and syrup has come to the boil. Reduce heat to *MEDIUM*. Continue cooking for about 8 minutes. Syrup should be slightly thickened. Remove from heat.

Divide the syrup between the jelly jars. Add a piece of the vanilla pod to each jar of syrup. Allow syrup to cool to room temperature—about 30 minutes.

Seal jars. *Store in the refrigerator for at least two weeks before using* to allow for the syrup to take up the vanilla flavor.\*

Yields about 1 1/4 cupfuls syrup

Notes: \*In a sterilized jar, this syrup will keep in the refrigerator for several months.

The vanilla pod pieces can be retrieved, rinsed, and thoroughly dried. They can then be used to scent sugar or to flavor a fruit sauce.

This recipe can be halved, when required.

1/20 SERVING (per tablespoonful) –  
PROTEIN = 0.01 g.; FAT = 0.0 g.; CARBOHYDRATE = 12.9 g.;  
CALORIES = 50; CALORIES FROM FAT = 0%

*People always ask vegetarians what they eat for Thanksgiving  
and what do they eat when they are invited to a cook-out.*

*I have wearied of those questions, have you?*

*There is something about traditional foods that just drives non-vegetarians crazy.*

*I have a pat answer for Thanksgiving.*

*Our attraction to cooking over an open fire and the smoky taste of food  
seems more complicated. Cremation references seem superficial.*

*Next month I'll share my take on that elusive smoky taste. Do stop by,*

*Judy*

Please note that all food value calculations are approximate and not the result of chemical analysis.

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