

# Vanilla

Vanilla is well known throughout the western world where it is widely used as flavour in cooking, baking and of course ice cream. Vanilla is extraordinary, not just for its irresistible creamy, sweet, smooth and mellow flavour but also because it is the only edible fruit of the orchid family, the second most expensive spice (after saffron) due to its long and labour intensive production process. Vanilla originates in Mexico, where it was first cultivated by the Totonaco Indians and Aztecs. It was introduced to Europe by the conquering Spaniard, Hernando Cortez in the 1520's. Its name is derived from the Spanish word 'vainilla', meaning 'little pod'. The noble and rich of Europe combined the precious beans with cacao to make an unusual and pleasing drink until Hugh Morgan, apothecary to Queen Elisabeth I, suggested that vanilla could be used as flavouring all by itself, and the versatility of the exotic bean was finally uncovered.

Vanilla has over 250 organic components that comprise its distinctive flavour and fragrance. Although scientists have been trying to genetically clone and reproduce vanilla in a laboratory environment for the past 25 years, they have been unable to capture the elusive and distinctive qualities that make it so very popular. Modern research has found that vanilla and its extracts is a powerful antioxidant with anti tumour and bacterial inhibiting effects. Due to its high price vanilla is not commonly used as home remedy. However the medicinal properties of this unusual fruit have validity and may be used by everyone. Due to its sweet smooth flavour, vanilla has a soothing, strengthening and moderating effect specifically on the digestive, respiratory and nervous system. For digestive disorders such as abdominal cramps or cold diarrhoea add the pulp of a vanilla bean combined with the freshly ground seeds of a cardamom pod to a bowl of warm rice congee. This is especially useful in children to whom the flavour of ginger may be too strong and pungent.

In ancient Mexico it was used to treat asthma and coughs. Vanillas soft flavour and moist nature puts it into the category of yin tonics in Chinese herbal medicine. The anti spasmodic and moistening action makes it useful for dry, nervous type asthma and cough as opposed to the phlegmy type. Add vanilla pulp to fennel seed tea with a teaspoon of honey to make a tasty remedy.

Vanilla combined with cocoa acts as a simple yet powerful antidepressant. Its calming action on the central nervous system combined with the soothing and slightly stimulating action of cocoa makes it an ideal home treatment for mild mood disorders. Combine the yield of a quarter of a vanilla bean with a teaspoon of cocoa powder in a cup of warm (soy) milk and enjoy.

For the highest quality and most flavoursome vanilla, of course always buy organic.

The barefoot doctor.