



History of Vanilla

David Green, July 10, 2009

It is certainly ironic that vanilla, the second most expensive spice in the world (after saffron), should be synonymous with bland and boring. The vanilla bean, from which we get the delicious flavouring actually comes from an orchid, the word is Spanish in origin and means '*little pod*'. For those of you who have only experienced the vanilla extract we get in super-markets, I would strongly recommend buying a couple of beans just to inhale that wondrous fragrance. The legend of the origin of this orchid says that a beautiful Princess, named Xanat, fell in love with a mere mortal. Forbidden to marry the couple eloped but were caught and beheaded. The spot where their blood touched the ground was where the first vanilla orchid bloomed.

More reliably attested to is the fact that the Totonac people, living in Mexico near what is today, Veracruz, were the first to utilize the bean. The Aztecs were so enamoured of the flavour that they conquered the Totonacs to ensure their supply. The Aztecs called it '*black flower*' because of the way it dries, darkens and shrivels up shortly after picking. When Cortes arrived at the Aztec court Montezuma in 1519 he was greeted with bowls of a dark liquid topped by frothy 'snow'. Chocolate, from the cacao bean, is bitter in its natural form so that the Aztecs had taken to mixing the chocolate with vanilla to sweeten it. The result was similar to the advent of Starbucks except on a grander scale. The Spanish soon had the royalty of Europe paying through the nose for a product for which they had the only source of both ingredients.

The English Queen, Elizabeth I, was notorious for her sweet tooth, ladies-in-waiting carried pockets full of candies, usually of confections of chocolate and vanilla, which she munched on through the day. In 1602 her apothecary, Hugh Morgan, suggested using the vanilla to flavour other products, he made candies from almond paste with vanilla amongst other things. Almost overnight a whole industry was

born, particularly amongst French chefs, which is why we refer to French Vanilla; this is not a distinct flavour, rather an acknowledgement of their creative industry in producing so many marvellous vanilla variants.

This was where the problem arose. With the vanilla orchid nature has produced one of those great symbiotic relationships; the vine which produces the orchid can only be pollinated by the local species of Melipona bee. Unfortunately no one realized this until a Belgian botanist, Charles Morren, worked it out in 1836 (he watched the bees while drinking coffee on a patio in Veracruz). Given the value of the commodity, both monetarily and in terms of power by virtue of the nobility's craving, you can well imagine the numerous attempts to transplant the orchid. The French, in particular, tried to grow it in what remained of their North American possessions, and then, as they dwindled, the islands and enclaves they controlled in the Indian Ocean. All to no avail! Morren did devise a very convoluted way of pollinating the orchids but it was so time consuming as to not be worth the effort.

Reunion is a volcanic island in the Indian ocean, east of Madagascar. Only 40 miles long by 30 wide it was first used as a 'prison' for French mutineers in 1642. Immigrant French set up sugar plantations with African, Chinese, Malay and Arab labour and, by 1830, the population had topped a 100,000. One of the slaves on the plantations was a 12 year old of African descent called Edmond Albius who was employed by his master, Fereol Beaumont, to watch over the valuable vanilla flowers he had imported. In 1841, without the assistance of the bees to watch, he also discovered how they were pollinated and worked out a method, using a twisted sliver of bamboo to lift the flap that separates the male anther from the female stigma he simply smeared the pollen on with his thumb. Success! This, with hindsight, simple method of pollination would revolutionize vanilla production as well as allowing it's cultivation throughout the tropics.

Today very little vanilla comes from Mexico, often the product sold in markets is mixed with the tonka bean; the majority of vanilla now comes from Madagascar, considered to be the best, and Indonesia. Between them they exported 8,600 tons in 2006, over 80% of the world's production. One of the culinary ironies is that vanilla and chocolate are considered the two poles of ice-cream where once they were inseparable.

Sources:

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The Herb Society of Nashville "The Life of Spice"

Reunion Island is also noted for the fact that in 1952 it received over 73 inches of rain in 24 hours; now that's a downpour.