



Vanilla beans (*Vanilla Planifolia*) are long thin pods from a variety of orchid that is grown on a commercial scale in Madagascar, India, Indonesia, Puerto Rico and the West Indies. When opened, the pods are waxy and dark, filled with little brown specks and emit a sweet fragrance.

There are three types of vanilla beans: Bourbon Madagascar, Mexican and Tahitian.

Bourbon Madagascar vanilla is a thin pod with a rich and sweet flavour, the sweetest of the three. Mexican vanilla tastes smooth and rich, whilst Tahitian vanilla has the thickest and darkest coloured pod that's aromatic but not as flavourful. Once vanilla pods are handpicked from the plant, they are dipped immediately in boiling water to stop growth, heated under the sun and wrapped to sweat at night for up to twenty days.

To develop that distinct vanilla scent and taste, pods are air dried and fermented for four to six months, producing the vanilla beans with which most of us are familiar.

The first people to have cultivated it are the Totonacs of Mexico's east coast. The Aztecs acquired vanilla when they conquered the Totonacs in the 15th Century. The Spanish, in turn, got it when they conquered the Aztecs. The Aztecs drank their chocolate with a dash of vanilla and Europeans, once they got used to it, followed suit.

Vanilla was thought of as nothing more than an additive for chocolate until the early 17th Century when Hugh Morgan, a creative apothecary in the employ of Queen Elizabeth I invented chocolate free, all vanilla flavoured sweetmeats. The Queen adored them and by the next century, the French were using vanilla to flavour ice cream, a treat discovered by Thomas Jefferson in the 1780s, when he lived in Paris as American Minister to France.

In the 19th century, demand for vanilla climbed sharply. Not only was it the established flavour of choice for ice cream, but it was an essential ingredient of soft drinks including John