

A Short History of Vanilla

For centuries, vanilla has been one of the most familiar flavors, fundamental to western cuisine. Commonly used to flavor desserts, beverages, milk products, and coffee, vanilla has become one of the most loved flavors of the western palate.

It is believed, the Totonaca people of Mexico were the first cultivators of vanilla, during Mesoamerican times. They believed that the Gods had bestowed this exotic fruit upon them.



Vanilla continues to be cultivated in the eastern portions of tropical Mexico.

In the 14th century, the Spanish conquistadors under Cortez, watched Montezuma, Emperor of the Aztecs, pulverize vanilla beans, combine them with chocolate and serve it as a drink in golden goblets to his most honored guests. The Spanish caught on quickly and by the middle of the 15th century, were importing it to Europe to use as a flavor in the manufacture of chocolate.

As European explorers and their attendant botanical recorders and collectors combed the forests of Central and South America, vanilla became more common in Europe. Europeans followed the example of the tribes in the New World and used vanilla in the production of medicine, as a nerve stimulant and as an aphrodisiac.

By the early 1800's vanilla plants were growing in botanical collections in Germany and France. Horticulturists were experimenting with conditions for its growth. From Europe it was transported to Reunion, Mauritius and the Malagasy Republic. In the new tropical colonies, slave labor discovered that hand pollination of the flowers was necessary to produce vanilla beans.

From these points, vanilla plants were taken to Indonesia, the Seychelles, and the Comoros Islands. At approximately the same time, vanilla was introduced as a crop in Martinique and Guadeloupe in the Caribbean.

