



## Vanilla-bean cuisine takes on chocolate for Valentine's Day

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On Valentine's Day, chocolate usually shoves vanilla aside with the insolence of a schoolyard bully. But today, vanilla - empowered by a newfound appreciation of its legendary bean - finally is refusing to cower.

A vanilla-bean cake says love as lustily as a box of single-origin dark chocolates.

There's a good reason for vanilla's newfound strength. Savvy consumers are discovering the difference between the real deal - a bean harvested from the orchid - and the widely available, artificially flavored extracts made from wood-pulp byproducts.

Pure vanilla, whether the whole bean, extract or ground, has a smooth flavor with earthy, complex undertones. Imitation vanilla, on the other hand, is saddled with an overpowering flavor and lingering chemical aftertaste.

"I tell people that they have no idea whether they like vanilla or not if they have only tasted imitation. The difference between real and imitation is night and day," says Eric Elsberry, who, along with his wife, Patty, owns Arizona Vanilla Company, a Mesa-based Internet import store that sells to the public and upper-crust bakeries.

Like magic, this small brown bean makes just about any food, from pork chops to chocolate, taste better. A sprinkling of ground vanilla tames bitter coffee, while a small scrape from a bean turns mashed sweet potatoes from a side dish to dessert.

"Vanilla acts like salt and pepper. It's an aromatic flavor enhancer," Elsberry says.

Like wine, vanilla's subtle undertones change by region. The key is matching the dish to vanilla from one of the world's top growing regions - Mexico, Tahiti and Madagascar.

Patty Elsberry, an accomplished cook and co-author of the "Simply Vanilla" cookbook, recommends using Mexican beans for salad dressings, chocolate desserts and flavored vinegar. Madagascar beans work best in savory dishes and fruit compotes, while Tahitian teams well with cream sauces and roasted garlic.

Vanilla comes in four basic forms: whole bean, extract, ground and paste. The bean, the most expensive at about \$1.35 to \$3 a pod, has become the vanilla of choice for bakers, chefs and food hobbyists drawn to its fuller, richer flavor.

The high cost of vanilla is due to the labor involved in cultivating and harvesting the pods. The process begins with hand pollination of the orchid on the single day of the year the flower opens. After the vanilla bean forms and matures, it is harvested and then subjected to months of curing and fermentation.

Pure vanilla extract, ground and paste are less expensive and more convenient. Although the flavor is still pronounced, these three forms taste less intense than fresh beans.

Filet mignon with vanilla wine sauce

For the sauce:

2 cups organic beef stock

1/4 cup dry red wine

1 small onion, sliced in half

3 large sprigs of fresh marjoram or oregano

2 whole garlic cloves

1 teaspoon Nielsen-Massey Organic Madagascar Bourbon Pure Vanilla Extract

1 1/2 tablespoons tomato paste

1 teaspoon light brown sugar

2 tablespoons butter, softened

For the steaks

4 (4-ounce) 1 1/2-inch-thick filets mignons

Salt and pepper to taste

2 tablespoons olive oil

Mushrooms

2 cups sliced mushrooms

1/4 cup clarified butter (see note)

For the sauce, combine the stock, wine, onion, marjoram, garlic, vanilla extract, tomato paste and brown sugar in a saucepan. Simmer until reduced by half. Strain through a fine mesh strainer into a small saute pan. Whisk the butter into the sauce 1 tablespoon at a time over medium heat. The sauce will become glossy and slightly thickened.

For the steaks, preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Season the steaks with salt and pepper. Heat the olive oil in an oven-safe skillet over medium-high heat.

Add the steaks and sear each side for 2 to 3 minutes. Place the skillet in the oven and roast for 8 to 10 minutes for medium or to the desired degree of doneness. Remove and let stand.

For the mushrooms, saute the mushrooms in the clarified butter in a medium saucepan until brown.

To assemble, place the steaks on a serving platter. Spoon the sauce over the steaks. Garnish with mushrooms. Serves 4.

Note: Clarified butter is melted butter that has had the white milk solids skimmed off the top, which allows the butter to be less heat-sensitive and reduces the risk of burning.

Source: "A Century of Flavor by Nielsen-Massey Vanillas" (The Cookbook Marketplace, 2008, \$27.95)