

Vanilla isn't just for desserts

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Vanilla can be sultry, rich, creamy, spicy, flowery and fruity. Part of its charm is that you're not aware of its flavor, but of the other ingredients, according to **Craig Nielsen**, chief executive of Nielsen-Massey Vanillas Inc., in Waukegan, Ill. What you taste depends on the origin of the extract. The company, which recently celebrated its 100th anniversary, produces extracts from vanilla beans grown in Mexico, Tahiti, **Madagascar** and Indonesia.



Indonesian vanilla is used industrially, not by home cooks, because its flavor is inferior, according to Mr. Nielsen. The other extracts are available and can be used for their distinctive qualities.

Madagascar bourbon vanilla has "very deep, rich, creamy notes," Mr. Nielsen says.

Mexican is a little spicier, with hints of clove and nutmeg, and Tahitian is very flowery and fruity.

"Put [Tahitian vanilla] in ice cream, and it tastes lightly of cherry. You're not reminded of vanilla," Mr. Nielsen says.

Although the accents Mr. Nielsen describes seem most appropriate for desserts, they enhance non-sweets as well.

"Vanilla is used to enhance other flavors. That carries over into savory aspects, especially when you're layering flavors in a dish," he says.

For example, add vanilla extract to a chili recipe, and you'll cut the acidity of the tomatoes while highlighting the flavor of the chilies, according to the vanilla expert, who recommends either Mexican or Madagascar bourbon for non-dessert recipes.

You'll also notice differences in flavor depending on when you add the vanilla.

"If you want it to blend in, you want to add it at the beginning of [cooking] a dish. If you want the 'pop,' add the vanilla toward the end of cooking so it doesn't have a chance to evaporate," Mr. Nielsen says.