

VANILLA & NDALI

As you might imagine, I have spent considerable time with vanilla. Pure extracts, vanilla pastes, beans from many different places in the world—even synthetic flavorings—I have tried them all, and I never tire of the rich, smoky scent of vanilla beans. Vanilla is one of the most versatile ingredients in my kitchen. I tuck vanilla beans behind my ear or stow them in my pockets. As I write these lines, a bouquet of vanilla beans sits on my desk, filling the room with its heady aroma.



Vanilla beans are the seed pods of an orchid that grows in tropical climates near the equator. This rare variety requires lots of rain, rich soil, and occasional bursts of sun filtered through a thick canopy of trees. Vanilla farming and production requires tremendous attention and care. Though insects occasionally pollinate the flowers, most of the delicate work of pollination must be done by hand, with a pin or paintbrush and within eight hours of the flower's blooming.

Some nine months later, the beans are harvested. Curing them takes up to six months. First they are blanched in hot water, then "sweated" in wool-lined wooden boxes. From there, the whole beans are packaged and distributed or used to make extract. Knowing about the labor-intensive, highly skilled process that farming and curing vanilla beans demands makes the heady scent of vanilla—the second most expensive spice in the world, after saffron—even more alluring.

Vanilla aficionados often tout beans from Madagascar, Tahiti, and where vanilla beans originated, Mexico. It's true that beans from these locales are of fine quality, with unique and notable characteristics. But I would argue that the beans I import from a small plantation in Uganda are the best in the world.

They are complex and smoky, with prominent notes of honey, jasmine, ylang-ylang, and amber.

As is true of many of the exotic ingredients an ice cream maker or pastry chef relies on, the farming and production of vanilla is often tainted with violence, child labor, and low wages. I believe that flavor is experiential—it doesn't just happen on your tongue, it also happens in your imagination. Knowing that the vanilla I use is grown by a group of farmers paid a living wage for their hard work and skill makes it taste better to me. And I experience a deeper level of appreciation and pleasure when I connect with the people who grow my ingredients.

Several years ago, I read about a small fair-trade farm in Uganda called Ndali Estate. An Englishwoman named Lulu Sturdy runs the farm that her family started decades ago. After inheriting the place from her uncle about ten years ago, Lulu dropped her life as a successful furniture builder in England and moved to Ndali. My kind of gal. When she arrived, she found that the farm was in disarray and losing money. She would have to start over. She began farming coffee, cocoa, cardamom, and bananas and then, vanilla. A government grant helped spur on the vanilla project.



Today, Ndali Estate produces high-quality vanilla beans and pure vanilla extract. Lulu pays the men and women who work for her a living wage, and she pays up to five times the normal price to the fair-trade vanilla farmers who supplement her supply. Feeling we were kindred spirits living on opposite sides of the earth, as I read about her, I dashed off an e-mail expressing my desire to use her beans in my ice creams. I quickly heard from her, but she had discouraging news. Because there was no distributor in the States who carried her vanilla beans, I would have to import them myself—at a minimum order of \$5,000.

Ordering \$5,000 worth of vanilla beans seemed wholly out of reach for our little company, which at the time was operating out of a little break room off our kitchen. But without even tasting the vanilla, I had determined I would do business with her. I e-mailed her back, promising to place an order soon, and began scheming for ways to get the money.

A few months later, in early 2007, I learned of an artisanal food contest sponsored by the Gallo Family Vineyards. The prize for the winner of each category happened to be \$5,000. I entered every category for which we could possibly qualify. I went for the obvious, outstanding dairy and outstanding confectionery, but I also entered our Cherry Lambic Sorbet in the outstanding fruit or vegetable category, just in case. I never thought we would win, but I was sitting on my front porch when I got the call from

the judges telling me that our sorbet had won. As soon as I hung up the phone, I raced to the computer and sent Lulu an e-mail: “Send us the beans, we have the money.”

Winning that cash prize turned out to be only the beginning of a very long journey to get the beans from Ndali Estate to our kitchen in the middle of the United States. Without the help of a customs lawyer (mistake number one!), it took us months and more than a few snags with customs to manage to import the beans. I’ll never forget the day they arrived. The box had been bounced back and forth between Uganda, New York, and Columbus many times, and it showed.

Still, these were the freshest vanilla beans I had ever laid my hands on. As we pried open the battered box in our kitchen and encountered the black mass inside, a honeyed scent filled the air. We began dissecting the beans at once, first cutting off the ends, then slicing them right down the middle. The opened pods revealed syrupy, glossy, tiny seeds that we scraped and plunked, with their pod cases, into a kettle full of slowly heating cream. Each batch of cream got no fewer than forty beans. It all felt so extravagant. After rapidly cooling the cream, we let the beans steep in it overnight. The next day, the cream had thickened like velvety custard. We spun it in our ice cream machines and pulled it out for our first bite. Each scent made an appearance one by one, vanilla followed by honey and fresh Ohio cream. It was the last time we ever spoke of “plain vanilla.”

