**Ingredient of the Month**

**Vanilla Extract**

**Vanilla** is a member of the orchid family. The flower that produces the vanilla bean only blooms for one day. Vanilla extract is a solution made by steeping cured vanilla pods in alcohol until the flavor is infused. According to FDA specifications, pure vanilla extract contains 13.35 ounces of vanilla beans per gallon during extraction. There are many different types of vanilla beans, and they can all be used to make vanilla extract. Vanilla is one of the most complex flavors in existence with more than 200 flavor compounds.

Vanilla is a native of South and Central America and the Caribbean. It is believed that the first people to have cultivated the plant are the Totonacs of Mexico’s east coast. Vanilla can only be pollinated by the melipona bee. This bee is found in the Central America. To duplicate the process in other parts of the world, flowers are hand pollinated by using a wooden needle. Vanilla was thought of as nothing more than an additive for chocolate until the early 17th Century. According to food historian Waverley Root, the first known vanilla recipe appears in the 1805 edition of Hannah Glasse’s “The Art of Cookery”, which still suggests adding “vanelas” to chocolate. Vanilla extract was invented in the mid-1800s and soon began to replace other ingredients such as rose water and orange flower water in recipes.

Vanilla Extract contains manganese and potassium which both play an important role in brain function. Natural vanilla extract contains numerous antioxidants, including vanillic acid and vanillin. Antioxidants protect your body from damage from harmful components, such as free radicals and toxins. It is thought to be able to prevent and reverse skin damage caused by free radicals.

**Healthy Ingredient Contribution**

Values from NutritionData.com based on vanilla extract, halves, 1 cup (208g)

**Manganese**- Vanilla extract has 24 percent of the recommended daily value of manganese. Manganese is an essential nutrient that helps activate enzymes needed for the body to use thiamin and vitamin C. It is also plays an important role in the normal functioning of the brain.

**Riboflavin**- Riboflavin acts as an enzyme in many reactions in the body—specifically in metabolic reactions. Vanilla extract contains 12 percent of the daily recommended value of riboflavin.

**Potassium**- Vanilla extract contains 9 percent of the daily recommended value of potassium. Potassium can help lower blood pressure. It is also important in brain function.

**Copper**- Copper is central to building strong tissue, maintaining blood volume and producing energy in your cells. Seven percent of the daily recommended value of copper can be found in one serving of vanilla extract.

**Magnesium**- Vanilla extract contains magnesium, which helps keep muscles, the heart, and the nervous system functioning normally.
**TYPES AND VARIETIES**

**PURE**- By FDA definition, a “pure” extract means that the vanilla flavor can only come from vanilla beans and nothing else. The most popular type of vanilla used to make extract is Madagascar vanilla, also known as Bourbon vanilla beans.

**IMITATION**- Imitation vanilla is produced from some wood byproducts. To substitute imitation vanilla for pure vanilla extract in a recipe, twice as much imitation vanilla flavoring is required to match the strength of pure vanilla extract.

**HANDCRAFTED**- Anyone can make his or her own vanilla extract. Just place split vanilla beans in a sealed container full of alcohol. Traditionally, this is done with vodka so the vanilla flavor is not overpowered. However, alcohols such as bourbon allow for a unique flavor combinations. Four vanilla beans are needed for every eight ounces of alcohol. After adding the beans, it is necessary to shake the bottle once or twice a week for about eight weeks.

**SELECTING AND STORING**

- Choosing between pure vanilla extract and imitation vanilla flavorings is up to each individual's palate. However, it is often recommended to use pure vanilla in any dish that won't be baked.

- Vanilla extract is best stored at room temperature and out of direct sunlight. Kitchen cupboards are usually a great place to keep your vanilla extract, as long as it is not near a heat source.

- Pure vanilla extract that has no added sugar or corn syrup will last forever, aging like fine liquor.

- While dark colored glass bottles are the optimal container to store your extracts, remember the health and safety implications of choosing glass over plastic.

**INTERESTING FACTS**

- Vanilla is the second most expensive spice in the world after saffron.

- Vanilla is the only fruit-bearing member of the orchid family.

- Vanilla is the favorite ice cream flavor in the United States.

- The definition of the word vanilla is “little pod” in Spanish.

- Vanilla extract is used to deodorize spaces such as microwaves. Veteran fishermen use it to mask the smell of their hands so the fish won’t detect them.

**CULINARY USES**

- Vanilla is a great enhancer of flavor. Whether a dish is “vanilla” flavored or not, it is considered an essential ingredient in many Western desserts, especially baked goods.

- The addition of vanilla extract can enhance vinaigrettes, sauces, and marinades.

- Most chocolate and chocolate-based recipes add vanilla extract, resulting in a light undertone that many people are accustomed to.

- A few drops of pure vanilla extract can act as a sugar replacer in coffee.