

Botany

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How to Make Vanilla Extract at Home

We've all been there. You're at the grocery store choosing between vanilla extracts. The artificial one is cheap, but it has nothing to do with actual food. It's just chemicals mixed up in a food lab. The real vanilla is good, but it's expensive. And the gourmet stuff is ridiculously expensive. What's a shopper to do?

Skip the store. Make your own!

You can make the ultimate, high-quality vanilla extract right in your kitchen. Yes, the gourmet stuff. Since you've made it yourself, you know it's free of artificial colors, flavors, or other impurities. And it's a tiny fraction of what you would pay at the store.

- Vanilla extract = \$18.19 per cup.
- Gourmet vanilla extract = \$43.60 per cup.
- Homemade, gourmet vanilla extract = \$8.74 per cup.

Let's get started!

Step 1: Gather Your Materials

You will need scissors (or a knife), a mason jar with a lid, alcohol (35%-50%), and vanilla beans.

Vanilla beans aren't standard fare in most produce departments and farmer's markets. You may need to get these online. Online shopping may be less personal, but it offers you a wide selection of options. Consider the following varieties of vanilla, to customize your gourmet creation:

- Madagascar/Bourbon: This is the traditional vanilla you're familiar with.
- Tahitian: These are more floral and fruity.
- Mexican: Sweet and woody with a hint of spice.
- African/Ugandan: Smokier and bold.

And these aren't your only options. You can also explore Indian, Tonga, and Indonesia vanilla beans.

As you browse the selection, you may notice that vanilla beans are given an A, B, or C grade. Grade A beans are more expensive and meant for cooking. They work fine in extracts, but the increased cost won't yield much difference in our finished product. Grade B vanilla beans cost less and are intended for use in extracts. These are generally your best option.

You can often buy grade B beans for around \$1.50 to \$2.00 each, depending on how many you buy at once.

Next, you'll need to select an alcohol. Alcohol helps to extract the flavor of the beans, and it prevents spoilage. You'll want something that's between 35%-50% alcohol. Around 40% is ideal, but don't get hung up on being exact. It's forgiving. And remember, you can use water to dilute your alcohol if it's too strong.

Most people choose an alcohol with a mild flavor, but you could also select one with a complementary flavor. Spiced rum, for example, could make your vanilla quite exotic.

There's no need to spend your money on a high-dollar alcohol. It's the quality of the vanilla beans, not the alcohol, that makes great vanilla. So go ahead and get the cheap stuff.

Use your scissors or knife to split the beans lengthwise and place them in the jar. If they're too long, just cut them so that they fit. Then pour your alcohol over the vanilla beans.

For regular, better-than-supermarket vanilla, use 2-3 beans for each cup of alcohol. For gourmet vanilla, use 5 beans per cup of alcohol. For mind blowing, legendary, sell-it-to-put-your-kid-through-college vanilla, use 7-8 beans per cup of alcohol. Any more than this and the FBI has to come and haul you away.

Cap it, shake it up, and put it away in the cupboard. Come back every few days to shake it up again. It really likes when you do that. Tell it that it's a good vanilla – a pretty vanilla. Sing it a little song. (You think I'm joking, but I'm not.)

Now comes the hardest part. Waiting.

How long do you have to wait? That depends. Do you want good vanilla, great vanilla, or life-altering vanilla?

For good vanilla, let it extract for 8 weeks. Go ahead and sniff it every so often. Maybe take a tiny sample. It's okay. I won't tell.

For great vanilla, let it extract for 6 months. Yes, 6 months. I know, I know. You want your vanilla now. But great vanilla takes time.

For mind-blowing, life-altering, legendary vanilla, let it extract for a full year. I'll pause now, while you finish cursing your computer screen. (...) All done? Good, because I have a compromise for you. Make 2 batches of vanilla – each one being enough for an entire year.

Use the first batch as the year goes by. It will get better with time, because it will keep extracting. Then when it's used up, open your year-old vanilla and let the good times roll! Just remember to start a new batch for the next year.

Cheaters ~~Never~~ Always Win

The 2 main factors in flavor extraction are time and surface area. (The alcohol-to-water ratio is important too, but we've already got that covered.) We could think of this like a formula.

$$\text{Surface Area} \times \text{Time} = \text{Great Vanilla}$$

If we want to reduce the time, without diminishing the vanilla flavor, we need to increase the surface area. By increasing the surface area, we increase all the places that flavor can be pulled out into our liquid.

To increase the surface area, we could cut our vanilla beans into smaller and smaller pieces with scissors. But who has time for that? Time is exactly the thing we're trying to cut down on! Let's just keep on cheating instead.

Toss those beans into your blender. Pour in your alcohol. Then blend it like your trying to destroy the evidence! You'll notice that the liquid turns darker right away.

Go ahead and cap it, and shake it up every few days, just as you would with the slower method. Open it up every week to sample it. You won't get a year's worth of flavor maturation in a week, but it will move along much faster.

This method does have a few downsides. For one, it's less visually appealing in the jar. Your friends will be more impressed with a jar of vanilla beans than a jar of bean powder. Also, it's hard to filter out the little bean pieces, and you may get them in your food. But that could also make it look more authentic. So that may actually be a bonus. Lastly, vanilla bean powder can't easily be repurposed for vanilla sugar.

What's vanilla sugar? Read on.

Repurposing Beans

Can you reuse vanilla beans? Yes, but the resulting extract won't be as strong. Feel free to try it. You might like it just fine. If not, just toss in a fresh bean or two, and let it extract again.

Some people also like to use a sort of "perpetual vanilla" system. Any time they use a little vanilla extract, they'll top the container back up with alcohol and let it continue extracting. Depending on how often you use your vanilla, this system works fine, though it does yield a diminishing quality vanilla over time.

Alternately, you can create vanilla sugar. Take out the used vanilla beans and let them dry. Place them in an airtight container and fill it with sugar. Then let it sit for a couple of weeks. Use the sugar in baking, coffee, tea, or anywhere else you'd like a sweet, vanilla flavor.

Gourmet Options

You now know how to make gourmet quality vanilla. But it's still just vanilla. What about fancy flavors? What about creativity? Let's do it!

First of all, remember the spiced rum I mentioned earlier. A flavored alcohol can really take your vanilla in a fun and unexpected direction. Another option is to add spices or herbs into the mix. How about adding a small piece cinnamon or clove? How does lavender vanilla or vanilla mint sound? Just put them right in the jar and let them extract together.

For a sweeter vanilla, add honey or maple syrup.

The only limit is your creativity and your bravery for experimenting with new flavor combinations.