

YUMMY NORTHWEST

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Extracting all the goodness

Holiday baking calls for plenty of flavored extracts.

Many commercial extracts contain sugar and a percentage of water, diluting their pure flavor. It's simple enough to make your own, so why not give it a try?

You will have to think ahead, however. It takes at least a month for the flavor to develop. But after it's made, you'll have enough for many batches of homemade goodies with that extra special taste that is all yours.

Easy does it

Jackie Emter loves to cook for her family of six in their log cabin perched in the hills near Reed Point, Mont.

"Ingredient control," she explained simply. "I know what I'm putting in, so I know it's a better product."

One day a friend shared her recipe for making vanilla extract.

"I can do that," thought Jackie, and soon she was selling vanilla and anise extracts.

Vanilla extract starts with beans. Jackie buys many of her herbal products by mail from the San Francisco Herb and Natural Food Co. (herbspicetea.com). This San Francisco-based company owns a farm in central Oregon, where they grow many of their organic herbs.

Vanilla beans, imported from Madagascar or Sri Lanka, are sold only in bulk quantities. At \$65 a pound, this is a hefty investment, but certainly less expensive



A VANILLA ORCHID

Not just plain old vanilla

Although the word "vanilla" can be used to mean "ordinary," the plant is anything but.

There are approximately 20,000 varieties of orchids, but only one produces an edible pod. Each vanilla flower has only 12 hours in which to be pollinated, and since there are only two natural pollinators – a small bee and a rare variety of hummingbird – the work is usually done by hand.

Then the beans are laboriously cured for up to four months. So it is not surprising that vanilla comes a close second to saffron in being the world's most expensive spice.

Vanilla beans grow wild in southern Florida and are grown commercially throughout the tropics, including Hawaii. But the best are from Tahiti, Madagascar, and Central America (the latter known as "bourbon" vanilla beans).

Be aware: although Mexican vanilla beans are good quality, vanilla extracts made in Mexico often incorporate tonka beans, which contain dangerous carcinogens.

than buying individual beans at the supermarket. Jackie extends their life by double-wrapping them and keeping them in the freezer.



A POUND OF VANILLA BEANS

Then three beans go into a liter (a fifth) of vodka. Jackie isn't particular about the brand and buys hers at the state liquor store.

"I go into the store in Billings at 11 a.m. and buy four or five bottles at a time," Jackie said. "The guy at the counter smiles and says, 'Have a nice day, ma'am!' They don't know I'm making extract."



YOU MIGHT LOOK LIKE A DRUNKEN SAILOR WHEN YOU ARE BUYING SUPPLIES

Note that you can buy vodka made in the Pacific Northwest, so be sure to ask for it.

Jackie stores her bottles in a root cellar, but any cool, dark place will do. "I write the date on the bottle and then forget all about it."

After three months, she pours the contents into smaller bottles, adds a bit of the vanilla bean, and packages the bottles in plastic bags to avoid spillage. Her products go to the farmers market, where lucky consumers are eager to buy them.

Jackie reuses her beans for as long as she can, recycling them into a new batch when a bottle is emptied.

"I have a hard time throwing away beans. They don't mold in alcohol; it acts as a natural preservative. I also add them to ice cream. You can grind them up, you know. They're pretty sticky, though. You have to let them dry first."

Jackie also makes anise extract by soaking anise seeds in the same way as for her vanilla extract.



ANISE SEEDS TURN VODKA INTO ANISE EXTRACT

Anise extract is great added to biscotti or other plain cookies. Rather than imparting a licorice flavor, it gives the cookies "a richer, buttery taste," according to Jackie. "I never appreciated it until I started baking with it."

Plans for creating other types of extracts, such as peppermint and citrus flavors, are in the works. For these she might add essential oils to the vodka and perhaps peppermint leaves or citrus peels.



Your very own vanilla extract

Put three whole vanilla beans into a liter bottle (a fifth) of any brand of vodka.

Let it sit in a cool, dark place for at least three months. The longer it sits, the better it will be.

If you want to hurry up the process a bit – and thereby make it more expensive – you can put as many as a dozen vanilla beans in the bottle, and let it sit for a month.

Using a funnel, pour the liquid into smaller bottles. Cut a vanilla bean into halves or thirds (whichever will fit) and place in the small bottle. You can use a bean from the vodka bottle or a fresh one.

A bit of "goo" will ooze out the end of the cut bean. This will heighten the taste of the extract. The goo will settle to the bottom of the bottle, but after you give it a shake, it will absorb into the liquid.

Note: The more vanillin – or vanilla flavor – a bean has, the more likely it is to crystallize, so seeing sparkles on the outside is a good sign.

Hard woods also contain vanillin, which is where imitation vanilla extract comes from.

Making almond extract is more complicated.

"I need oil of bitter almonds," Jackie said. "Or something called benzeldahyde. But you have to order it in this huge amount, and you just can't get it easily."

Once the ingredients are gathered, anyone can do what Jackie does. But some people simply prefer buying what she makes.

"For most people, if I already have it made up for them, they will buy it. If they had to go and do all this, it would never get done.

"I love making everything, from the beginning to the end result. I love being part of all that."

To order Jackie's Back Country extracts and other products, including jellies and soap, call her at (406) 930-1704.

Using your vanilla bean

Reuse vanilla beans to make more extract or use them in foods like ice cream, milkshakes, or custard.

Most of the flavor is in the bean itself, so you can grind new or used dried beans (a coffee grinder works well) and add the powder to various foods.

Or scrape the bean by cutting it in half lengthwise and running a sharp knife along it to scoop up the seeds. Use these for flavoring by stirring into batter.

You can also rinse and dry a used bean and place it indefinitely in a container of sugar for a nice flavor.

Find more cooking information at vanilla.com.

About Yummy Northwest

Each monthly issue highlights an edible delight available in the Pacific Northwest and Montana.

Contact the editor

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