

Would you be very much surprised to know that vanilla ice-cream outsells chocolate by three-to-one¹ in the United States? It does! Now *everyone* loves chocolate. So what does this tell us about vanilla?

What is Vanilla?

Vanilla is, as found in little brown bottles in the local grocery store, an odoriferous extract prepared from the processed pod of the [Vanilla planifolia orchid](#). Originally harvested in Mexico, vanilla is now grown in other places throughout the world because of the discovery that the orchid could be hand-pollinated. Because it originates from a plant, vanilla consists of a complex assortment of organic, or carbon-based, compounds. Vanilla is used in a variety of ways, but it is especially used for foodstuffs, perfumery, and in aroma therapy.

What is Vanillin?

That being said about *vanilla*, what then, is *vanillin*? Vanillin consists of a single organic compound synthesized in the laboratory and in factories. This compound is also the major component of vanilla. In all fairness, it is a useful flavoring, as natural vanilla extract is quite costly, vanilla being the second costliest spice, after Saffron. Its high cost is not due to rarity, but due to the intensive labor involved in processing the pods.

Why is Vanilla SO Expensive?

What labor could there possibly be in preparing a seed pod for extraction to produce vanilla? There are four steps. The pod tissues are first stopped from growing further (killing), then they are treated by a complicated warming procedure (sweating), followed by a process to reduce moisture (drying), and lastly they are specially stored (conditioned) for a number of months.²

Is all the trouble worth it? Apparently it is, judging by its popularity and the fact that the sales of vanillin has not eliminated sales of the much more expensive natural product.

So, the next time you are enjoying a piece of decadently-rich chocolate - perhaps a truffle, keep in mind that it is vanilla, not chocolate,³ that is the best-seller of ice cream in the United States.

Warning! Mexican Vanilla, sold in tourist markets in Mexico, is sometimes mixed with extract of the Tonka bean, known to contain Coumarin, a toxic substance, as evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration.⁴