Voice of the Expert

Tapping into the Complexity of Vanilla

Andy Mohar, Principal Flavorist

The term "very vanilla" has given rise to describe things that are basic, standard or safe. However, vanilla is anything but plain. It can add complexity, character, nostalgia, and differentiation across many applications.

Andy Mohar, Principal Flavorist, shares how when used thoughtfully vanilla can be a powerful tool for creating memorable products.

Q: What is a misconception about vanilla?

A: In my opinion, treating vanilla as simple, or interchangeable among varieties, can be a mistake. Vanilla varies by origin, format, concentration, application, and labeling impact. A vanilla that works beautifully in ice cream may not perform the same way in a protein beverage or baked product.

My advice to product developers is to treat vanilla as a strategic ingredient, not just a default flavor.

Q: What makes vanilla so complex?

A: Natural vanilla contains more than 200 naturally occurring chemical compounds that work together to create its distinctive aroma, flavor, warmth, sweetness, and depth.

Some of these compounds are present at extremely low levels, even parts per billion. Individually, they may be below the taste threshold, but together they contribute to the full vanilla experience. This is one reason vanilla is one of the hardest flavors to replicate accurately.

When it comes to creating a product, I recommend that vanilla is not used simply as a basic background note. Understand that it is highly complex flavor system that can shape the entire sensory profile of a product.

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"Everyone always thinks of vanilla as "plain", but it is a **very complex flavor** that can add a lot of depth to an application."

Andy Mohar, Principal Flavorist & Vanilla Expert



Voice of the Expert: **Tapping into the Complexity of Vanilla**

Q: How does vanilla origin impact taste?

A: Vanilla comes from the vanilla orchid which is the only edible fruit from the orchid family. Producing it is a long, labor-intensive process and it only grows in tropical regions near the equator. Much like origin affects coffee, chocolate, or wine, origin can influence vanilla.

Different origins can bring different flavor nuances:

1. Madagascar: Rummy, bourbon-like, resinous, slightly fruity, creamy and classic

2. Indonesian: Smoky, woody, phenolic, bold

3. Tahitian: Floral, fruity, marshmallow-like.

4. Ugandan: Sweeter, cocoa-like, less bourbon-like, earthy with nutty notes

Did you know...?
Vanilla can only grow in **Tropical environments,** between **20° North and South** of the Equator.



Q: How can vanilla be used to create consumer appeal?

A: Vanilla is strongly tied to emotion and memory. It can cue nostalgia, comfort and indulgence. Think of the smell of an ice cream shop, fresh cookies, breakfast foods, or celebration desserts. It can make a product feel familiar, premium, or craveable, depending on how it is used.

At the same time, the complex and aromatic profile of vanilla can benefit better-for-you applications by serving as a natural flavor enhancer. Its rounded, aromatic profile can help soften bitterness, mask off-notes, and improve taste in high-protein, high-fiber, or reduced-sugar products.



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Q: In your opinion, what is the future of using vanilla in product development?

A: Vanilla will always be a standout in sweet applications, but its future is much broader than desserts and beverages. I see opportunity for vanilla as a versatile flavor-building tool in savory innovation, where it can contribute subtle sweetness, roundness, depth, color, and complexity without making a product taste overtly sweet.

In savory applications, vanilla can complement caramelized vegetables, roasted onions, marinades, glazes, sauces, and spice-forward profiles. Used thoughtfully, it can help balance acidity, soften bitterness, enhance browned or roasted notes, and create a more layered eating experience.

For product developers, the opportunity is to move beyond traditional assumptions and experiment with vanilla in unexpected formats. I would be happy to help tailor a vanilla profile for different flavor systems and connect with our culinary experts to identify pairings that bring out the best in each application.



Ready to benefit from the complexity of vanilla? Reach out to craft a vanilla profile perfectly tailored to the consumer experience you want to deliver. Click to request a FREE sample.

Want to learn more about the the surprisingly complex world of vanilla, including the labor-intensive cultivation and curing process and the compounds that contribute to its distinctive taste and aroma?

Check out the Flavor University® Podcast: Vanilla—Anything but Plain.

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