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The Totonac people of the 15th century, from what is present-day Veracruz, Mexico, were the first to cultivate vanilla. When the Aztecs overran the Totonacs, they became so enamored with vanilla that they levied taxes to be paid with the prized ingredient. Spanish explorers brought it to the shores of Europe in the 16th century, but it was so expensive only the wealthy could enjoy its flavor. The French tried to reduce the cost of the exotic New World ingredient by mass-producing it in the Réunion and Mauritius Islands, but the vanilla flowers, which are of the orchid family, would not bloom without the help of the Mexican *Melipona* bee. Vanilla cultivation outside of Mexico failed until the late 19th century, when forced pollination became successful.

their vanilla for up to two years to bring out the full flavor. When the curing process is complete, the spice is packaged for commercial use, either as a pod, powder or extract. Vanilla extract is made by steeping vanilla beans in alcohol and water for several months, sometimes with added sugar. Vanilla powder, which is white in color, comes from the ground beans. Whole vanilla pods are dried, cured and stored in airtight containers to retain their flavor.

Though all of the vanilla grown today originates from the same species of orchid the Totonac people harvested centuries ago, vanilla beans derive unique flavors from the regions where they are grown. Vanilla from Madagascar, Comoros, Seychelles and Réunion—

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While natural pollination only occurs in Mexico, farmers now pollinate vanilla flowers by hand in several tropical regions, allowing wider availability of the precious bean.

Processing the vanilla bean is a long and laborious affair. It comes from the fruit of the *vanilla planifolia* orchid. Tasteless when harvested, vanilla pods are soaked in hot water, dried in the sun and wrapped in blankets at night. This curing process can last for two to six months and causes the enzymes in the bean to catalyze, creating the vanilla taste. During the curing process, the beans turn a dark brown color and develop a white crystalline substance on the outside. Some producers age

called Madagascar Bourbon Vanilla—have the thinnest beans and a creamy, sweet, mellow flavor. Indonesian vanilla has a woody flavor, and Tahiti produces the thickest vanilla beans, almost black in color, with a flowery, smooth, fruity flavor. The original Mexican vanilla is creamy, sweet and spicy. Vanilla from Madagascar and Mexico is considered by many chefs to be of the highest quality. In Italy, the ingredient is quite popular, lending its buttery fragrance and flavor to espresso drinks, biscuits, gelati and countless desserts. When cooking, Italians prefer to use whole vanilla beans or powder over the extract because the best vanilla flavor comes directly from the pods and the powder they produce. □