How to Flavor with Vanilla

When it comes to baking, vanilla is a very important ingredient. But did you know that there are multiple forms of vanilla? There’s vanilla extract, vanilla beans, and vanilla paste. There’s even things like vanilla syrups and vanilla sugars, and many more ways to get that tasty vanilla into your baked goods.

Let’s talk about the most popular choices – vanilla extract, beans, and paste. Learn the differences between these three and how to best use them in your baking.

Vanilla Extract

This is probably the most common form of vanilla. This actually takes the vanilla bean, mashes it up, and infuses it with a mixture of alcohol and water. This is the most readily available to people and most affordable. It’s simple to measure out and use in your baking.

Vanilla Beans

Vanilla beans are the perfect use of the vanilla. They're much pricier and harder to work with, but you might find the flavor they produce to be well worth it. These waxy, dark brown pods are filled with flecks of brown which give such a hearty and satisfying flavor. You’ll wonder why you haven’t been using them all along.

You want to find beans that are plump and smooth with a slight shine and that are highly fragrant. Avoid dry beans. Using them in light fluffy desserts like white cake, cupcakes, or muffins gives such an intense vanilla flavor that you might never want to go back to using another form of vanilla again. Be warned, though; it will leave specks of brown in the food. To some this is great, but if you want a pure white cake then this isn’t going to be the way to get it.

Vanilla Paste

This is kind of the best of both worlds when it comes to choosing between vanilla beans and vanilla extract. With the ease of use that the vanilla extract has but with the bolder flavor of the bean, this could be a great option for you. Vanilla paste is just the scooped-out pod of the vanilla bean in a nice convenient jar. So you are getting all of the flavor of the bean without all of the hassle. It will still provide those flecks of color in your baking like the actual bean does.

Most recipes do call for actual vanilla extract but if you do decide to substitute the bean or paste for the extract, you can. One bean actually equals about three teaspoons of vanilla extract. For vanilla paste, consult the jar to see how much to use in your recipes. It usually shows the conversions between vanilla extract and the paste. When in doubt, gradually add to your baking, tasting after each addition to help you determine the right amount of vanilla flavor.

The next time you bake, try something new. You might find that you really like the end result much better if you use vanilla beans or vanilla paste instead of the more common vanilla extract.