

## Vanilla Extract vs. the Imitators

There are all kinds of vanilla flavorings out there. Not all are extracts.

The FDA has established that a gallon of Single-Fold Pure Vanilla Extract should contain the extractives of 13.35 ounces of beans at no more than 25% moisture content. After processing, the minimum alcohol content must be 35% and the vanillin content must be .11 grams per 100 ml. Anything less than these standards is labeled and classified as a Pure Vanilla Flavor, not as an extract.

There are two methods to create vanilla extract, macerating and percolation. The maceration method places the alcohol and the beans together for a period of time to allow the 200 or so flavor elements of the vanilla beans to seep into the alcohol. The mixture is then strained before bottling. The second method is percolation. This is where the alcohol is in a reservoir and is continually pumped and allowed to drain through the vanilla beans on racks. Either method creates the same results, Pure Vanilla Extract.

Natural vanilla is an expensive ingredient. This is the major reason that Pure Vanilla Extract is expensive. The second reason is that most extract is aged for a period of time before it is bottled and sold. Some manufacturers will age the extract up to one year. Most is only aged a few months. Like fine spirits, age mellows out extract. Extract usually reaches its peak at 2 years. But, since most companies cannot afford to age extract for 2 years, they will add some sort of syrup or sugar to the extract to mellow out the alcohol. This sugar or syrup is the only other ingredient that the FDA allows to be added to extract and still carry the label of Pure Vanilla Extract.

Many other liquid vanillas are manufactured, especially in Mexico. Most Mexican vanilla, is NOT pure vanilla extract. If you read the label most of them contain only 1.5% alcohol. This happens because they start with pure vanilla extract, and then dilute it with liquid glycerin. Then to give the intense vanilla flavor and aroma, synthetic vanillin (the aroma and flavor compound in natural vanilla) is added to the mixture. This allows the product to be very aromatic and contain that strong vanilla flavor, but it can be manufactured extremely cheap. This is why most Mexican vanillas are very inexpensive.

For any extract look at the label and see the ingredients. It is the only way to be sure that you are buying Pure Vanilla Extract, and not merely an imitation. Another method to see if you are dealing with Pure Vanilla Extract, or simply imitation flavorings is to taste the liquid. See our page on tasting vanilla for how to do this. If you use the sugar method, the difference between extract and flavorings becomes immediately noticeable.

