Vanilla: The Cultural History of the World’s Favorite Flavor and Fragrance
Patricia Rain
New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2004
371 pp. Illustrations. $22.50 (cloth)

Vanilla: Travels in Search of the Ice Cream Orchid
Tim Ecott
New York: Grove Press, 2004
228 pp. Illustrations. $24.00 (cloth)

The Spanish conquistadores, beguiled by the vanilla-scented chocolate they quaffed with the Aztec emperor Montezuma, sent home sacks of cocoa beans and the pods of the exotic orchid the natives called tlilxochitl. Both soon became quintessential flavorings in the culinary pantheon. However, while chocolate has been the subject of innumerable books, until recently comparatively little had been written about the pods or beans the Spaniards named vainilla, a small sheath or pod, derived from the Latin vagina.

Now two vanilla-obsessed authors have chronicled the fascinating saga of the world’s second-most-expensive spice (after saffron) from its origins in the forests of southeast Mexico to its ubiquitous presence in almost everything we eat today. Each author tackles the history, botanical characteristics, and cultural, culinary, and political significance of the fruit of the only known edible orchid, but they approach their subject from different perspectives.

Patricia Rain, author of Vanilla: The Cultural History of the World’s Favorite Flavor and Fragrance, is a Californian who has crowned herself the Vanilla Queen and devotes her considerable energies and charms to promoting all things vanilla. Her company, Vanilla.com, sells everything from fine-quality beans and extracts from different parts of the world to vanilla-scented massage oil and candles. She publishes a monthly Internet newsletter that includes product information, recipes, and tips, and she attends conferences wearing her vanilla-bean headdress. But the regalia masks the persona of an authoritative, socially conscious anthropologist and environmentalist dedicated to improving the lot of the small farmers who grow and process beans.

Tim Ecott, author of Vanilla: Travels in Search of the Ice Cream Orchid, is a British journalist who became smitten with life on the languorous Indian Ocean islands, discovered vanilla, and has girdled the globe exploring the equatorial zones where the orchid flourishes. Ecott knows a good story and how to tell it with reportorial scrutiny. His first-person narrative reads like a good mystery story as he delves into the intrigues and complexities—economic, political, social—of the volatile vanilla trade, both past and present.

Rain and Ecott often travel parallel paths. They eventually meet at the Vanilla Queen’s home in San Jose for vanilla scones and tea and lengthy conversation about their favorite topic, finding common ground in their concern for the environment and the plight of the all-too-often-exploited plantation workers harvesting this very labor-intensive crop. In his book Ecott offers vivid accounts of his encounters with growers and dealers during plantation visits in Africa, where he concentrated his research, as well as in Mexico and Tahiti. Rain, who has spent considerably more time south of the border, has made many trips to Papantla, center of the Mexican vanilla market, and has helped reestablish the market for pure, deeply flavored Mexican vanilla extract. Its reputation had been tarnished by unscrupulous dealers who had added poisonous coumadin from the tonka bean to enhance flavor.

Naturally, there is some overlap between the two books, but they are more complementary than competitive. For the historian and vanilla aficionado both are worthy additions to the gastronomic library. For the hands-on cook, Rain has the edge, enhancing the text with dozens of sweet and savory recipes and food-related sidebars. The vanilla saga each author describes begins in the forests of Mesoamerica where Vanilla planifolia, a tropical climbing vine that grows as high as one hundred feet in the wild, was initially found.
green flowers, forty or more to a vine, that open one day a year—fortunately not all on the same day. In their original habitat the flowers were pollinated by an insect, the melipona bee, during the few hours before the flower faded and dropped from the vine. The green pods, or beans, that develop from the fertilized flower grow to from six to twelve inches long over a period of nine months, turning yellow as they ripen. The pods, each containing many thousands of minuscule black seeds, are picked quickly before they split open and are matured over a period of several months by a process of repeated sweating in steam or boiling water at night and drying in the sun during the day. During this process of fermentation and curing, the beans develop a complex flavor and fragrance profile containing an estimated 250 to over 500 organic compounds. Finally, after the pods shrivel and become supple, they take on a rich, dark brown color and the ineffable intoxicating aroma associated with vanilla.

The vanilla and cacao beans that arrived in Spain from the New World started a vogue among European nobility for vanilla-laced hot chocolate. Rain relates the story of the seventeenth-century Tuscan approach to chocolate, a jasmine-chocolate beverage concocted by the scientist...
Francesco Redi for his patron Cosimo III de’ Medici. She includes the recipe, which calls for jasmine flowers, cinnamon, and ambergris in addition to vanilla. The eighteenth-century French gastronome Brillat-Savarin declared that chocolate without vanilla was only cocoa paste, but “when we add the delicious perfume of vanilla to this mixture of sugar, cocoa, and cinnamon, we achieve the ne plus ultra of perfection to which such a concoction may be carried” (p.85). Ecott notes that the Marquis de Sade included vanilla-chocolate pastilles in a list of foods he wished sent to him while in jail and that Madame de Pompadour, mistress of King Louis XV, had chocolate “flavored with vanilla and ambergris, accompanied by celery soup and a handful of truffles” (p.31) served to her at dinner.

Ironically, vanilla was introduced to the United States via France rather than Mexico, when Thomas Jefferson requested that a friend in Paris ship him fifty “batons, wrapped in newspapers” (p.112)—one of the many gastronomic delights our first American gourmet had discovered during his sojourn as ambassador to France. Rain includes Jefferson’s original formula for ice cream, calling for “a stick of vanilla,” along with a sidebar on the famed vanilla-flecked and velvety rich Philadelphia ice cream that became a favorite throughout the country.

As the offspring of a vanilla-centric family of home bakers, I was delighted when an opportunity came my way to visit Tahiti and observe the processing of vanilla from vine to bottled extract. During my travels from island to island, I encountered pretty much the same cast of characters portrayed by Rain and Ecott, though I never had the opportunity to hand-pollinate an orchid, as described in great detail by Ecott. Plantation owner Alain Plantier showed me how the freshly picked pods are cured over a period of several months, alternately dried in the sun during the day and wrapped in blankets overnight to sweat.

The modest, unassuming, and very powerful vanilla broker Mme Jeanne Chane, known as the Empress, took me through her warehouse on the island of Raiatea and showered me with gifts of superb beans, including some preserved in rum. Marc Jones, an American who has settled in Tahiti and is trying to revitalize the local vanilla industry, exports beans and makes vanilla extract. At his heavenly scented factory, Jones chops the beans and immerses them in a mixture of alcohol and water in which they are aged for several months to develop flavor.

Vanilla extract has been a popular substitute for the hard to split and scrape bean since the late nineteenth century. Look to the Vanilla Queen to guide you through the intricacies of pure versus imitation (made from wood pulp) and artificial (from the chemistry lab), the complex nuances of extracts from different parts of the world, and new products like vanilla paste and salt, as well as the myriad ways to use both bean and extract. Her recipes range from simple wafers to vanilla-laced fresh creamed corn and Cornish game hen with cherry vanilla sauce. Alas, you will have to flip through the pages to find these recipes—neither book has a much-needed index. On the plus side, each has a good bibliography and a fair number of black-and-white illustrations—photographs of the orchids and pods, the curing process, and ephemera such as old ads for extracts.

What is most enlightening, however, is joining the authors on their vanilla odyssey. As Ecott writes, quoting an American vanilla broker: “Be careful, this little plant is addictive. If you start following it around the world it’ll get a grip on you and it won’t let go” (p.158).