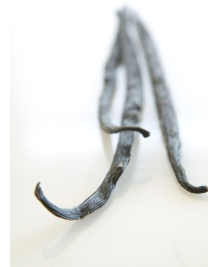




For those of you who have not seen it yet, our website has begun to sport a racy new pair of debutantes: NoMU Pure Vanilla Extract and NoMU Vanilla Paste. In their honour, I have decided to dedicate this month's mailer entirely to the intoxicating powers of vanilla, an essential ingredient in my kitchen. Here are a few of my all-time favourites which are simple, uncomplicated and perfect for all-year-round entertaining. Enjoy!

Tracy



SPICE FILES



Vanilla is to desserts as Coco is to Chanel. It is undoubtedly the quintessential perfume for food. The known origins of vanilla can be dated back to 1427 when the Aztecs conquered the Totonacos Indians in Mexico, who had been making use of the fascinating orchid with edible pods for decades or even centuries. The Aztecs extracted the juice from the pods and added it to their bitter chocolate drinks for added flavour. It was only in the 16th Century that the Spanish conqueror, Hernando Cortez returned to Europe with the prized pods after literally obliterating the Aztec civilization. Many tried to grow it away from its native lands with no success. Much to their dismay, they realised that the vanilla orchid had to be naturally pollinated by an indigenous hummingbird and bee. Today vanilla is grown in only a few tropical areas such as Madagascar, Indonesia, Mexico and to a lesser extent, Tahiti and Uganda. A dedicated and time-consuming process of manual pollination discovered in the 19th Century is now used where each and every flower is pollinated by hand on the one and only day that it flowers.

The scent of vanilla is erotic and intoxicating. To the Aztecs vanilla epitomised femininity and symbolised fertility by the abundance of seeds. Each pod is safeguarded by a sheath to prevent accidental fertilization. Cortez named them vainilla from the word "vaina", which in turn is from the Latin "vagina" meaning "sheath".

After pollination, the plump pods are harvested, followed by a careful process of sweating and fermenting. The pods are then slowly dried during which time they develop their deep brown colour and intense aroma.

To use vanilla pods, take a sharp knife and carefully split the pod in half lengthwise. Using the tip of your knife, scrape out the seeds and use to infuse your desserts. Store the remaining pod in your sugar jar to create the most beautiful vanilla sugar.

Vanilla pods do dry out and lose their aroma, therefore pure Vanilla Extract, which is the result of a time-consuming hydroalcoholic extraction process, is the perfect substitute. It is not cheap, but every drop is worth its weight in gold. The beauty about our Vanilla Paste is that we have added the vanilla seeds for you so that your desserts will look like you've just scraped out a pod yourself. Please stay away from all vanilla essences which are artificially and sometimes chemically produced.

RECIPES

crème brûlée

4 cups cream
1 tsp NoMU Vanilla Extract
8 egg yolks
½ cup caster sugar
extra caster sugar to brûlée

Preheat your oven to 140°C.

Gently heat the cream to scalding point. Do not allow it to boil! Remove from the heat.

Whisk the egg yolks until pale and creamy. Add the Vanilla Extract, followed by the sugar and whisk until well combined. Do not over-work as you do not want too many bubbles in your mixture.

Pour the cream into the egg mixture, stirring or whisking constantly. Pour this back into the saucepan and stir over gentle heat until thick enough to coat the back of a spoon.

Pour into 10 ramekins which have been placed in a baking dish filled with enough hot water to cover two thirds up the ramekins. Bake for 30 minutes or until the custards are very lightly set on top.

Remove from the oven and baking dish and refrigerate for at least 2 hours.

When you are ready to serve them, sprinkle the top with caster or demerara sugar and caramelize the sugar using a blowtorch. Serve immediately.



TIP: If you do not have a blowtorch, place the ramekins in a baking dish filled with water and ice-cubes. Place under an extremely hot grill to caramelize the top. This must be done very quickly otherwise the custard will start to melt. It seems like hard work, but it is definitely worth the effort!



vanilla bean ice-cream

Nothing beats home-made vanilla ice-cream. It is the most definitive ice-cream on earth, simply perfect enjoyed spoon by spoon. For a quick-fix dessert, place a generous scoop in individual bowls and serve with a shot of steaming espresso and a shot of grappa. The perfect indulgent pick-me-up at the end of an evening.

500 ml full cream milk
500 ml cream
1 tsp (5 pumps) **NoMU Vanilla Paste**
150 g caster sugar
8 egg yolks

Gently heat the milk and cream until just before boiling point. Add the Vanilla Paste and leave to infuse for 10 minutes. Beat the egg yolks and caster sugar until pale. Pour the hot mixture slowly into the egg mixture, stirring constantly. Return to the heat and cook very gently, stirring constantly until the mixture coats the back of a wooden spoon. Cool completely. Churn in an ice cream maker according to manufacturer's instructions until firm.

pasteis de nata

The harmony of the creamy vanilla custard and the rich flaky pastry deem these Portuguese custard tarts irresistible! Don't worry about making the pastry yourself as it is incredibly time-consuming. Ask your local baker to supply you. The hardest part about making these is that they are best eaten at room temperature, therefore you have to muster up every bit of self-discipline not to slot one in while it's still hot!

2 cups milk
1 tsp **NoMU Vanilla Extract**
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup caster sugar
8 egg yolks
2 tbsp cornstarch
1 kg butter puff pastry.

Preheat the oven to 190°C. Gently roll out your pastry to a thickness of no more than 5mm and cut out circles of approximately 12cm in diameter. Using a muffin tray, push the pastry rounds into each of the 12 cups, so that the pastry comes over the top and there are no visible folds. Place in the fridge until ready to use.

In a saucepan, combine the milk, cornstarch, sugar and Vanilla Extract and heat over a medium heat, stirring constantly until the milk reaches scalding point. Place the egg yolks in a bowl and whisk lightly. Slowly add the milk mixture to the egg yolks, whisking constantly. Pour the mixture back into the saucepan and cook for a further 5 minutes, stirring continuously until the mixture thickens slightly.

Fill the pastry cases until $\frac{3}{4}$ full and bake for 20 minutes until the pastry and custard are nicely browned.



panna cotta



4 cups cream
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup caster sugar
5 ml (5 pumps) **NoMU Vanilla Paste**
4 leaves gelatine

Place the cream, sugar and vanilla in a saucepan to gently heat, stirring until the sugar has dissolved. Soak the gelatine in cold water for 3 minutes, before gently lifting it out of the water, squeezing out any excess liquid and adding it to the cream. Stir until completely dissolved.

Pour into 8 moulds and refrigerate for 4-6 hours.

To serve, invert onto a plate and serve immediately with summer berries, dusted lightly with icing sugar.

TIP 1: You may need to very briefly dip the mould into boiling water to loosen the panna cotta before inverting.
TIP 2: Leaf gelatine is available at specialty food stores, however you can replace it with $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp powdered gelatine dissolved in 3 tbsp water.

BACK TO BASICS

custard

2 cups cream
1 cup full cream milk
6 egg yolks
2 tbsp cornflour
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup caster sugar
1 tsp **Vanilla Extract or Paste**

Gently heat the cream, milk and Vanilla Paste to just before boiling point. Beat the egg yolks and caster sugar until pale. Add the cornflour and whisk well to remove any lumps. Pour the hot mixture slowly into the egg mixture, stirring constantly. Return the mixture to the saucepan and continue to cook very gently, stirring constantly until the custard coats the back of a wooden spoon and leaves a line if you run your finger through it. Please note, if the custard is not cooked long enough, you will still taste the cornflour.

TIP: To prevent a skin from forming, place cling film directly onto the surface of the custard. This will also keep it warm until ready to use.

