

French Polynesian Vanilla

Taha'a

By Adam H. Graham

NATIVE TO MEXICO, the vanilla orchid blooms for one morning each year, ready for pollination by the endemic *Melipona* bee. Vanilla's resulting rarity made it an extravagant luxury—to the Aztecs in the 15th century, and in Europe after that. Even today, the only orchid to bear edible fruit produces the world's second-most-expensive spice (after saffron). The best vanilla comes from a trio of French Polynesia's Leeward Islands: Raiatea, Taha'a and Huahine. There, French native Alain Abel produces three *grands crus* of vanilla, one on Raiatea and two on Taha'a, and sells them to top chefs like Guy Savoy, Joel Robuchon and Alain Ducasse. What makes this vanilla superior? Abel hand-pollinates the *Vanilla x tahitensis* orchid (shown), which accounts for only 1 percent of the world's production. But it's the French Polynesian terroir that does the trick: A loamy, coconut-rich soil, four hours of morning sunshine and a month of fermentation under the island sun help produce a supple bean with a powerful sweet, musky flavour that's anything but bland.



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