

Excerpt from: *The Extraordinary Ordinary: A Vanilla Essay*
By Ellie Sapat

The smell of vanilla seemed to linger in the air, always a little longer than I expected. As a young kid, it once smelled so good to me, that I asked my mom if I could have some to taste, plain. She laughed, “Vanilla doesn’t taste good on its own! It works to make everything else taste amazing.” I couldn’t believe her. Holding the vanilla bottle, in direct defiance of my mom, I snuck a drop of the extract before she could stop me. The flavor hit me like a sharp reproach, and it was not the vanilla I knew. This taste was dark and bitter and strong. I almost gagged on it, not because the flavor was too unpleasant, but because it was so...unexpected. My favorite, most trustworthy flavor had turned on me. “See?” my mom said “it really doesn’t taste good on its own.” Still reeling from the shock of betrayal, but unwilling to admit I was wrong in my assumptions, I turned to my mom. “No. I like it. It tastes good.”

For such a mild flavor, vanilla holds a surprising number of contradictory tensions, potential for battle, and not just in my household. In the last decade, pure vanilla extract has become increasingly rare and thus expensive, yet the term vanilla is used to denote the common, plain, basic: the boring ice cream flavor, a comforting hand lotion scent. The ultimate companion flavor, vanilla plays a supporting role in elevating but never upstaging other flavors. Vanilla has become ubiquitous and yet unique; it is a God among flavors, it is *the* flavor, and yet, because of this, it is ordinary *and* mundane. And then there is the ongoing question about what the genuine article, vanilla, really is--surprisingly more complicated (and contentious) than you’d think, as illustrated by my ongoing and lively disagreement with my mother over the distinction between real and artificial vanilla. I was so used to my mother’s baking skills that I never even knew desserts could be regularly concocted from boxes until much later in my life. In my world, birthday cakes were always made from scratch, cookie recipes were named after the family friends who passed them on, and pie crusts were flaky, rolled out on a crowded counter. While I was oblivious to the store-bought nature of desserts I encountered outside of my house, I did notice a difference in taste. But for me, that difference wasn’t offensive; in fact, it wasn’t even slightly off-putting. No, I actually liked it. Perhaps these distant memories hold the seed of my dawning realization: there were two vanillas, real, and artificial. And while I liked them both, for my mother, there was only ever one true vanilla. Offering me the scent of pure vanilla extract, letting me lick the bowl-- I see now that she had been training me from the beginning to swear my allegiance, along with her, to the real thing. But conflict was brewing on the horizon.