

A Better Brand of Vanilla Extract: Your Own

Most of vanilla's flavor compounds are soluble in either water or alcohol, so the most shelf-stable form of vanilla is vanilla extract, produced by soaking vanilla beans in a solution of 65 percent water and at least 35 percent alcohol. We wondered if we could make our own vanilla extract by soaking a split vanilla bean in heated vodka (which would contribute very little of its own flavor). After testing several ratios of vanilla beans to vodka, we arrived at 1 bean per $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of vodka as the proportion most closely resembling the potency of our recommended store-bought brand, McCormick Pure Vanilla Extract. We then tested our homemade extract against this supermarket product in sugar cookies, crème brûlée, and vanilla buttercream frosting. In each case, our extract outperformed the commercial version, boasting cleaner, more intense vanilla flavor.

To make vanilla extract, split a fresh bean lengthwise and scrape out the seeds. Place the seeds and split pod in a 1-cup sealable container. Add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup hot vodka (we used Smirnoff—a premium brand is not necessary) and let the mixture cool to room temperature. Seal the container and store at room temperature for one week, shaking gently every day. Strain the extract, if desired, and store in a cool, dark place. The extract should keep indefinitely.



BETTER FLAVOR, BETTER PRICE

This store-bought extract costs about \$4 per ounce; our homemade version costs half that.

TEST KITCHEN TIP Lettuce Storage

Here's the best way to store the most common types of lettuce when you get home from the supermarket:

LETTUCE TYPE

HOW TO STORE