When many people hear the word “vanilla,” they imagine something along the lines of the UrbanDictionary.com definition, which reads, “unexciting, normal, conventional, boring.” Little do they know that vanilla is actually a fascinating product with a unique history.

Most people are unaware that vanilla comes from the seedpod of an orchid. Patricia Rain, a vanilla expert (and self-proclaimed “Vanilla Queen”), writes:

[Orchids are] one of the oldest families of plants in the world, a family that probably evolved more than 90 million years ago. Orchids are the largest family of flowering plants in the world with over 25,000 species in the wild and more than 100,000 hybrids created in laboratories and hothouses. (2)

Of all those species, the vanilla orchid is the only species that produces an edible product. As the Aztecs who cultivated the plant hundreds of years ago discovered, vanilla’s distinctive fragrance and flavor develops only after a complex process of growth, harvesting, and curing. This process is so labor-intensive that it makes vanilla one of the most expensive agricultural products in the world—at one time it was even worth its weight in silver (Ecott 1).