

Vanilla Recipes

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

‘Real vanilla is heady, sensuous and jungle-sexy with a can’t-quite-get-enough intensity that leaves the eater mildly unhinged with desire’

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall,
The Guardian, Saturday 23 February 2008.

Stewed or roasted rhubarb, peaches, plums, nectarines, pears and apples, either simmered or roasted, with a whole vanilla pod and a little sugar are wonderful fillings for tarts and pies. And keep a jar of vanilla-infused fruit compote in the fridge, for spooning over yogurt for breakfast or for serving with ice-cream for an instant after-dinner treat.

Of course, we tend to think of vanilla as an essential ingredient in puddings but, used judiciously, it works well with meat, fish and vegetables, too. Add a dash of real vanilla extract to the glaze for a baked ham, say; or gently infuse a pod in warm oil or butter, and then sizzle scallops or sea bass fillet; or infuse in a pumpkin soup as it cooks, then scrape out the seeds and stir through.

Ndali Vanilla Panna Cotta

2 Ndali vanilla pods
500ml organic double cream
250 ml whole milk
25 grams caster sugar (ideally vanilla sugar)*
approx 3 sheets leaf gelatine (or powdered if desperate)

To make some vanilla sugar in advance, just push a couple of split vanilla pods into a kilo of sugar in a large jar and leave for at least two weeks.

To make the panna cotta, split the Ndali vanilla pods lengthways, and put them in a pan with the milk and cream. Bring slowly almost to the boil, then remove from the heat. Allow to cool to a hand-hot temperature, stirring occasionally.

To set the panna cotta use leaf gelatine, or powdered if it’s all you can get. Prepare according to the instructions on the packet, soaking the leaf gelatine in cold water, or dissolving the powdered gelatine in hot water (as little water as you can get away with). In either case, use ONLY HALF the amount specified in the instructions to set the volume in question. The panna cotta should be as lightly set as possible to just hold its shape. Three sheets (of the brand we use) is just about perfect.

Stir the prepared gelatine into the hot cream, along with the caster sugar. Scrape the tiny seeds from the vanilla into the cream and discard the pod.

Divide the cream between 5 or 6 small moulds (eg dariole type) and put in the fridge to set.

To serve up the panna cotta, wrap each mould with a warm damp cloth for about 10 seconds, then unmould directly onto a small plate.

You can eat one on it's own, but we like to serve our panna cotta with a little compote of seasonal fruit on the side: rhubarb in late winter and early spring, gooseberries in early summer, raspberries and redcurrants midsummer, and bramley apples in the autumn and winter.

***Vanilla sugar**

split a couple of vanilla pods and put them in a jar filled with caster sugar, seal and leave to infuse for a couple of weeks. If you can't wait that long, put a cup of sugar into a blender with a vanilla pod and pulse until the vanilla is mixed with the sugar. Toss into a jar filled with more caster sugar, shake and this "extra-strong" vanilla sugar will be ready to use in just a couple of days.

Rhubarb and custard tart

Infusing both the custard and rhubarb with vanilla ensures a subtle if substantial hit. Serves six to eight.

28cm blind-baked sweet pastry case
500g rhubarb, cut into 5cm pieces
Zest of ½ orange
3 tbsp fresh orange juice
3 tbsp caster (or vanilla) sugar (see above)
1 vanilla pod, split and cut in half

For the custard

250ml double cream
1 vanilla pod, split
5 egg yolks
2-3 tbsp caster (or vanilla) sugar

Preheat the oven to 200C/400F/gas mark 6. In a roasting tin, mix the rhubarb, zest, juice, sugar and vanilla, then bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until soft and slightly caramelised. Leave to cool, strain off the juices and remove the vanilla. (Save the juice for stirring into Greek yogurt or as the base for a rhubarb martini, the perfect great chef's treat.) Reduce the oven temperature to 130C/250F/gas mark ½.

Meanwhile, make the custard. Pour the cream and split vanilla pod into a pan and heat until the cream is just scalded. Whisk the egg yolks and sugar, then pour into the cream, whisking to combine. Pour through a fine sieve into a jug. Scrape the seeds out of the pod and into the custard.

Spoon the rhubarb into the pastry shell and pour over the custard until it's about 5mm from the top. Bake on a tray in the middle of the oven for 30-40 minutes, until the custard is just set but not too firm. Serve cold.

Vanilla-cured sea bass

The vanilla cure brings out the creamy sweetness of the fish's flesh.
Serves six to eight as a starter.

100g 'extra-strong' vanilla sugar*
75g sea salt
15g coarsely ground black pepper
700-800g line-caught sea bass (or organically farmed salmon),
in two large or four medium fillets
1 stick rhubarb

Mix together the vanilla sugar, salt and pepper, and sprinkle some into a small, rectangular, non-metallic dish. Place the first fillet skin-side down in the cure (or two fillets, slightly overlapping, if you have four), then sprinkle another, slightly thicker layer of cure over the top. Arrange the next fillet(s) skin-side up and sprinkle over another layer of cure. Spread some clingfilm or foil over the fish, place a plate or board on top and weigh it down with a brick, storage jar, tins of food or whatever comes to hand. Put in the fridge for 24 to 48 hours.

To prepare the fish for serving, carefully lift the fillets from their cure one at a time. Give them a very quick rinse under the cold tap and pat dry with kitchen paper or a clean cloth. Lay the fillet on a board, skin-side down, and run a flexible filleting knife between the flesh and skin. Once the skin is removed, slice the fish thinly, cutting slightly on the diagonal.

Cut the rhubarb into 10cm pieces and poach in simmering water until just tender - about three to four minutes. Plunge into iced water to stop the cooking, drain and slice thinly.

Serve the cured bass with plenty of rye bread and butter, and a little poached rhubarb on the side.

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Vanilla chicken

Gentle hints of vanilla plus the prunes and apple in the sauce make this a cosy, easy supper. It doubles up well, but keep to the one vanilla pod in the marinade. Serves four.

4 tbsp fruity extra-virgin olive oil
Zest of a lemon
1 tbsp honey
1 large vanilla pod, split
1.5kg free-range or organic chicken pieces, skin on
150g stoned prunes
2 apples, cored and cut into thick slices
4 tbsp water

In a bowl, whisk together the oil, zest and honey. Add the vanilla pod and chicken pieces, and turn over in the marinade. Seal in a plastic bag and marinate overnight in the fridge. Remove from the fridge about an hour before cooking.

Preheat the oven to 180C/350F/ gas mark 6. Heat a nonstick pan over a medium-high heat and brown the chicken pieces on all sides - about five minutes.

Tip the marinade, prunes, apples and water into the pan, cover tightly with foil and/or a lid, and bake for 18 minutes, turning once during the cooking. Divide between warmed plates and serve hot.

[guardian.co.uk/Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall](http://guardian.co.uk/Hugh_Fearnley-Whittingstall)

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