



FAIR TRADE
VANILLA
BEAN

WORDS & RECIPE BY HEATHER VILLA

Eula baked. She was my grandmother, sweetening my days with her confections. When she asked me what kind of cake I'd like for my birthday, I eagerly suggested vanilla with chocolate frosting. She agreed. At my party, I savored a slice of cake and drank coffee. I didn't know any other kid who had access to such amazing cake or coffee. I loved my tenth birthday.

The chocolate used in the icing likely didn't come from a fair trade source, and neither did the coffee from a can. We didn't even know about fair trade as we innocently indulged. And as far as I know, my grandmother may have used artificially flavored vanilla in the cake batter. But now I know about fair trade.

Recently, I casually asked my daughter, who will soon celebrate her tenth birthday, to tell me what she knows about fair trade. She replied, "Coffee. And it's something that's fair."

My daughter needed a clearer perspective. I told her, "Fair trade provides people a better life. For instance, farmers who harvest fair trade chocolate are able to take care of their families. The farmers' children aren't forced to work, but can attend school, just like you." My husband added, "Fair trade products cost a little more, but when we pay a bit more, we help others." Then one ordinary day, I learned that there's so much more to fair trade.

I, too, like my grandmother and mother, like to bake. I credit not my grandmother, but my mother for teaching me how to make scones. Ready to make scones, I reached for some vanilla extract. After all these years, I finally questioned the origins of vanilla. I looked at the label on the little glass jar. There was no fair-trade logo, and there wasn't even a drop of vanilla left in the jar. That day I didn't make vanilla scones.

Before I purchased more vanilla I wanted to find out the story of vanilla. I searched the Internet and within seconds I discovered Ndali Estate in Uganda at www.ndali.net, where fair trade vanilla is purchased from farms, processed, and exported. When I contacted Lulu Sturdy, the managing director, I had no idea she'd be in the middle of harvesting vanilla.

I patiently waited for several days, until 58 tons of green vanilla beans were harvested. The harvest came after farmers carefully tended the soil and hand pollinated each and every vanilla bean flower. Following the harvest, Sturdy shared there's still, "Lots of hard work for the next nine months." The vanilla must be blanched, sweated, fermented, dried, and conditioned. Plus, she and the employees will get the last year's harvest ready to be exported.

During all the hard work throughout each season, the vanilla farmers know, without a doubt, they will be paid enough money for food, shelter, education, medical needs, and clothing. When consumers pay a fair price for vanilla, the farmers are paid a fair price. And that fair price equals hope for those people.

Paying a fair price is only a part of the Ndali's model. The safety of the workers and preservation of the environment are backed by a sustainable economic model. For instance, while the consumers of fair trade vanilla experience a flavorful and quality product, the employees experience economic and environmental stability. And because Ndali supports organic farming, harmful pesticides are avoided, resulting in a safer working environment for the farmers, and processors.

Part of the success of the operation is the result of Sturdy, who figured out a way to turn her family's property into a successful fair trade organic operation, along with the dedicated employees. Ndali Estate purchases vanilla beans from 1,200 Mubuko farmers. The farmers have learned about the economics and communication needed to run successful farms. Mbusa Joesph, Chairman of Mbuku Vanilla Farmers Association, another link to the success of fair trade vanilla in Uganda said, "Mubuku started as a fair trade group right from the grass roots of the village, with no apparent educated leaders, a challenging mountainous geographical terrain stretching to 200 km, and zero cash flow." Since 2005 Ndali Estates and the vanilla farmers from the surrounding have prospered together. The success of one depends on the other.

Over the last several years, lives have changed. Kato Bernerd, the Ndali Estate processing manager said, "Before working at Ndali I was a local bus driver. I felt over-worked, restless and unhappy. Now my work is big but I love it. With my profits I bought a piece of land and two plots in a trading centre which I have developed with buildings." I also learned Bernerd shares his success with his family, and is able to provide his children with an education. He also gives back to his community, often contributing to others in need.

Joesph also shared, "Most of the funds our government uses to run this country (Uganda) come from donors. But if there are people out there who seriously want to help us, the best way you can do this is through paying fair trade prices to farmers. When we receive the fair trade price for our vanilla, we receive 100% of that money for our work, and we have 100% control over how to use it."

My hope is when my daughter is an adult, fair trade won't be an alternative, but the norm. Until then, I'll search for fair trade products that extend beyond chocolate and coffee. And maybe someday, when my daughter bakes a cake for her grandchild, she'll use fair trade vanilla.

Hopefully, soon, Ndali Vanilla beans, extract, and powder will be available for retail in the United States. In the meantime, the vanilla beans hide out in several varieties of commercially-produced desserts, Lush Cosmetics, and many other brands in the U.S. Ndali Vanilla may be purchased online from www.amazon.co.uk.



vanilla scones

Ingredients

2 cups whole wheat flour
¼ cup turbinado sugar
1 tbs aluminum-free baking powder
½ tsp salt
3 tsp ground whole vanilla bean (one inch of a vanilla bean, equals one tsp)
1 cup coconut milk

Instructions

1. Consider using fair trade, organic ingredients.
2. Preheat oven to 400° F.
3. Snip approximately three inches off of a vanilla bean. Grind in coffee grinder until fine.
4. In a large mixing bowl, add flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, and ground vanilla beans. Mix together.
5. Slowly pour the coconut milk over the mixture and blend, working quickly. If the dough seems dry, add water, one tablespoon at a time, until the ingredients stick together.
6. Lift the mixture out of the bowl, transferring to packing pan or cast iron skillet.
7. Gently shape the dough to form a round, approximately one inch tall and eight inches in diameter.
8. Cut uncooked dough into eight wedges (like a pie), and slightly pull apart.
9. Place in the oven and bake for about 20 minutes.

Note: If specks of ground vanilla remain in your coffee grinder, your next pot of coffee will be wonderfully flavored with hints of vanilla.

