



TRANSCRIPCIÓN ORIGINAL DE STUDIO OCHENTA

HOW NO TO TRAVEL - EPISODE 5 - VANILLA ICE CREAM

00:00 KIONA

So, basically when we're eating vanilla ice cream, we're eating the entire world.

00:05 KIONA

Hi, this is Kiona.

00:09 LUIS

And this is Luis.

00:10 KIONA

And we're your host of How Not to Travel Podcast Season 3.

00:13 LUIS

Fasten your seat belts and take your seat at the table.

00:17 KIONA

In this season, we're traveling around the world from our dinner tables to see how cultural exchange contributed to some of the world's most famous foods.

00:25 LUIS

This week: vanilla ice cream.

00:29 LUIS

So, Kiona, I wanted to ask you, could you tell me what's the wackiest ice cream flavor you've ever had?

00:38 KIONA

The first thing comes to mind is one time I took my little friend who's 10 years old. We went to go for ice cream and he asked the lady that he wants several 'chicle', which means he wanted gum flavored ice cream.

00:54 LUIS

Yeah, bubble gum, right?

00:55 KIONA

Yeah, and I was like, 'chicle', why? So, I asked if I could taste some of this. It is blue, orange, pink... It's all these different colors mixed together. And I felt like the taste was literally blue. Do you ever feel like colors have a taste?

01:15 LUIS

Oh, yeah.

01:16 KIONA

It tastes like red. It literally just tastes like blue.

01:19 LUIS

Yeah, blue has always been a very difficult taste of pinpoint because it's not quite blue berry.

01:24 KIONA

Yes.

01:25 LUIS

Or blackberry or...

01:26 KIONA

It's like blue dye.

01:27 LUIS

Yeah, blue. You know, like the Gatorade, like the blue Gatorade doesn't really taste like a specific thing. It just tastes like itself.

01:34 KIONA

Exactly. Yeah, like the blue Gatorade or the red coolate or whatever.

01:38 LUIS

Yeah.

01:39 KIONA

It just tasted like that. What about you? What was your wackiest flavor?

01:43 LUIS

Well, my wackiest flavor, I had it when I visited this small town in Guanajuato in Mexico called Dolores Hidalgo. I believe you know about it, right?

01:53 KIONA

Yeah, I lived there for two months.

01:54 LUIS

You probably know then the history of that town, right?

01:58 KIONA

Yeah, it was the town of the Mexican independence if I'm not mistaken.

02:03 LUIS

Exactly. Yeah. So this town's main square is well known for two things. One of them is just that. It's the place where Mexico basically declared its independence from Spain in 1810, where like our founding father, Miguel Hidalgo, went and did this famous declaration that is officially when we consider the start of our nation as an independent nation from Spain.

02:28 KIONA

Right, Al grito.

02:29 LUIS

Which is why it's called El Grito de Dolores. Right? But it's also, and this has absolutely nothing to do with that, but this same town square is also home to a lot of little ice cream vendors that sell all sorts of ice cream flavors.

02:49 KIONA

Okay, give us some examples.

02:51 LUIS

Yeah, so I mean, you've got your chocolate, your strawberry, your lime, your mango, all of these, but then you also get flavors like mole, chicharrón, avocado, beer. And of course, most people don't really try them. And you know, the most they do is get like a picture of their quirky menus with all of those wacky ice cream flavors as a souvenir.

03:17 KIONA

That was definitely me. Was that basic taking just the picture and not trying any of the ice cream whatsoever?

03:22 LUIS

And then when I went there, I actually was feeling a little more adventurous than usual.

03:27 KIONA

Okay, so which one did you try?

03:29 LUIS

I had shrimp cocktail flavored ice cream.

03:33 KIONA

That sounds disgusting. How was it?

03:36 LUIS

It was surprisingly good.

03:39 KIONA

Okay. Describe.

03:41 LUIS

Yeah, you know, I mean, to be honest, it was a little weird at the beginning because like, you were sort of expecting to eat ice cream and it's not a flavor that you would associate when you're eating ice cream, right? But to be honest, in the end, it basically just kind of tasted like a very, very chill shrimp cocktail, like a shrimp cocktail that you just took out of the freezer.

04:01 KIONA

Okay. So basically you're saying that these ice cream vendors are magicians.

04:05 LUIS

Kind of. Yeah.

04:07 KIONA

And they can turn ice cream into your favorite meal.

04:09 LUIS

Yeah. Or rather, they can turn your favorite meal into ice cream.

04:12 KIONA

Right. Right. Yeah.

04:15 LUIS

But anyway, I wanted to ask you after talking about all these wacky flavors, let's say you're on like a family food like show, right? And the prompt is we asked 100 people to tell us what they think is the least interesting ice cream flavor. What would be your first response?

04:30 KIONA

Vanilla hands down. I mean, we even, I even describe people as vanilla. Like if you go out on a date with somebody and it was, it wasn't bad, but it wasn't good. It was vanilla.

04:43 LUIS

It was okay.

04:44 KIONA

Yeah. Exactly. So that would be my guess.

04:47 LUIS

Vanilla. And it's obvious, right? Like we even use, as you said, we even use the term plain vanilla to refer to something like meh. Right?

04:54 KIONA

Yeah.

04:55 LUIS

And it's so weird to me because going back to the vendors in the Dolores Hidalgo and they're wacky little ice cream flavors of all sorts, I would like to argue that the most interesting flavor on their menu is in fact vanilla.

05:12 KIONA

What? Okay. Where is this coming from?

05:15 LUIS

It's so weird that we think of vanilla as this dull flavor when in fact it has such a rich history that has developed over centuries, over millennia actually and gone around the world and has a lot of intersections of biology and geography and climate and history and colonialism as well. And there's just so much to talk about with vanilla and with vanilla ice cream.

05:43 KIONA

Actually, now that you mentioned it, I do remember hearing somebody say somebody tell me that vanilla per pound or something like that or is more expensive than silver. But I don't know if that's true.

05:55 LUIS

I wouldn't be able to say for a fact if it is more valuable than silver, but it's definitely a very expensive spice or an expensive ingredient. And it's interesting because you see vanilla everywhere, right? But then you wouldn't expect it then to be so expensive.

06:13 KIONA

What is making it so expensive?

06:15 LUIS

That's what we're going to go into in this episode. We're going to talk about why it's such a valuable and expensive and rare ingredient, but then also why is at the same time such a popular ingredients of flavor so many different things. So before we dive into the history of vanilla, I wanted to talk about the origin of the word vanilla.

Basically, vanilla is just a diminutive form for 'vaina', which means 'pod'. So vainilla.

06:42 KIONA

Okay. So is the plant a pod?

06:44 LUIS

Yes. The vanilla bean is in fact a pod. And yeah, I just love the word vaina so much because it reminds me of my Colombian and Venezuela friends who say the word 'esta vaina' to refer to whatever. And it's just such a lovely Spanish word, isn't it?

06:59 KIONA

Oh, so it means like whatever?

07:01 LUIS

Yeah, it means like that thing or this thing and it can refer to anything. Like if you grab something like this thing, it's just 'esta vaina', you know, like 'esta vaina no sirve'.

07:11 KIONA

Oh, okay, okay. I understand. All right, so where exactly does it grow?

07:15 LUIS

Historically, it was grown in Mexico and specifically in eastern Mexico. And it turns out that there is only one species of bee in the whole world that naturally pollinates vanilla. This is the melipona bee. And this is where the story starts in pre-Hispanic Mexico. And at that time, vanilla was an important ingredient in Mexican chocolate.

07:40 KIONA

Ooh, when chocolate is a whole different thing, right? Like they are, I believe it's a Mayan Mexican chocolate is a Mayan invention.

07:48 LUIS

Yeah, definitely the Mayans had a version of chocolate as well as so many other Mexican indigenous tribes, including the totonacs, which were the ones who lived in this area of eastern Mexico and who originally grew and harvested vanilla.

08:06 KIONA

Did you know that hot chocolate, one of the first recipes to include vanilla, is nothing like the beverage you probably enjoyed today. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, chocolate was made with water and cacao beans, as well as vanilla and cornmeal, which was used for thickening.

It was also served lukewarm and sometimes included other spices such as achiote, the bright red condiment used in tacos al pastor. It was only after the Spanish conquest that they added the ingredients we all associate with chocolate today, milk, sugar, and cinnamon.

And they also came up with the idea to drink it hot.

08:49 LUIS

Vanilla was first grown by the Totonacs in eastern Mexico, which is in modern-day Veracruz, and then the Aztec Empire conquered them, and then the Spanish Empire conquered them, and then it was taken to Europe after the Spanish conquest. And that is when it started to be used in more recipes, especially in more recipes that we now associate with vanilla more.

09:11 KIONA

Oh, okay. That's how the Europeans got it. Was this series of colonization basically or conquering?

09:18 LUIS

A double conquering effect, because we always talk about the Spanish conquest, but it's important to mention that the Aztecs were also conquerors of other indigenous communities.

So then vanilla was originally thought of as nothing more than just another ingredient for chocolate, because that's the context where they found it. But then in the early 17th century, there was a creative apothecary who was employed by Queen Elizabeth I, and he invented the first chocolate-free, all vanilla flavoring. And the queen adored it. And so eventually it started to be added to all sorts of things, especially to pastries and to desserts. And importantly, the French were the ones who used vanilla to flavor ice cream.

10:08 KIONA

I'm kind of confused. If only the Mexican bee was pollinating the vanilla plant, how are these people getting vanilla?

10:16 LUIS

Yeah, that's a great question. So originally, you could only get it in Mexico, because that's the only place where the bee pollinated the vanilla plant. And a little parentheses here, because we want to talk about vanilla ice cream, let's give a very, very brief and summarized history of ice cream. So there are conflicting sources. Some of them say it started in Persia about 2,500 years ago. And we know that Alexander the Great enjoyed a snow and ice flavored with honey and nectar. And there's also biblical references that show that King Solomon was fond of ice drinks. And other sources say it's from China from 2,200 years ago. And it was known as a mixture of rice and milk packed in snow. But in any case, Marco Polo eventually brought a recipe for ice cream from the far east to Italy. So then in Italy, it started to become something much closer to modern day ice cream around the 16th century. And then when it arrived in France, as we said, that was when the French finally decided to flavor ice cream with vanilla.

11:27 KIONA

Did you know that Italy has been serving ice cream for more than 500 years? The French may have added vanilla to ice cream first, but Italians had already established a tradition of gelato since the 16th century. Gelato means frozen in Italian, and it refers to the specific method of ice cream preparation that started there after Marco Polo brought it from Asia. And the story goes that the very first gelato was made from milk, egg yolks, sweet wine, lemon, orange, and honey, and then served to Charles V, the King of Spain.

12:03 KIONA

Ok, so how did I get to the US?

12:08 LUIS

Yeah, that's a great question, because it was later added to ice cream in France, as we said, and eventually it made its way to the US, by way of none other than Thomas Jefferson, who then was American minister to France.

12:22 KIONA

Ok, so Thomas Jefferson brought vanilla from France because he was stationed there for a while.

12:28 LUIS

Exactly. Yeah, he was there in the 1780s, and among his many accomplishments and everything he's known for, he is a reason that vanilla ice cream arrived to the US. And he's also incidentally the reason that Crème brûlée arrived in the US as well. He brought his French acquired taste to the US.

12:46 KIONA

Got it. He sounds very bougie.

12:48 LUIS

Yeah, very much. And actually, this is a rather well-known story. He is, in fact, the first American credited to write a recipe for vanilla ice cream in the US. And that actual recipe, you know, in his own handwriting and everything is still in the Library of Congress.

13:05 KIONA

So going back to Vanilla, how the heck did Vanilla get to France if the bee was only in Mexico?

13:09 LUIS

We talked about how Thomas Jefferson was the one who brought vanilla ice cream to the US by copying the recipe and bringing it back. But I'm actually more interested in another slightly more clandestine journey that Vanilla had. So while Mexico is the birthplace of vanilla, today, the number one vanilla producer is Madagascar.

13:36 KIONA

What the heck? That's on the other side of the world. How?

13:40 LUIS

Madagascar is the world's largest vanilla producer with over 2,900 tons per year. And Indonesia is the second largest producer, but Vanilla arrived in Madagascar first. And that is actually where the modern Vanilla industry blossomed.

13:53 KIONA

Okay. How the heck did they get that bee to fly from Mexico to Madagascar?

13:59 LUIS

Here's the thing they didn't. The melipona bee continues to be the only species of B that naturally pollinates vanilla. So I'll preface this with the fact that almost all of these stories start with somebody smuggling something to a place they're not supposed to take it. There's an anecdote that says that in 1793, a single vanilla vine was smuggled out of Mexico by a sailor to the island of Reunion off the coast of Madagascar.

14:27 KIONA

So I guess back then they didn't have those little things at the airport where you have to put your bag through a can't. You know, check if you are bringing any agriculture into the can.

14:37 LUIS

They didn't have customs. Yeah, exactly. Yeah, it was a lot easier, I guess.

14:41 KIONA

Okay, so he smuggled the pods, but how did he smuggle the bee?

14:45 LUIS

So he didn't. He brought the pods to Reunion and then they were grown there and Reunion is actually an important vanilla producer despite being such a small island. But then eventually they made their way to Madagascar as well. So people there started growing vanilla, but they didn't have any pods at first. And what they didn't know was that they were missing a key factor, which was the melipona bee. So they couldn't bring the bee to Madagascar. So farmers in Madagascar had to learn how to pollinate vanilla flowers by hand.

15:21 KIONA

That sounds like how like incredibly tedious.

15:23 LUIS

It's an incredibly labor intensive process.

15:27 KIONA

I mean, just picture it, right?

15:28 LUIS

Because there's no bees to do the job, you basically have to go to the male part of the plant. You know how plants, a lot of them have male and female parts, right? So you have to go to the male part of the plant, collect the pollen, and then you have to gently add it to the female part. And then you have to repeat the process for every single flower on the plant.

15:49 KIONA

This is flower porn.

15:51 LUIS

Yeah, this is quite literally flower porn. Yes.

15:55 KIONA

Who was the person that invented this process? There is this really interesting story about Edmund Albius, who was a 12 year old enslaved person on the French controlled island of Reunion. So the vanilla vine was smuggled into Reunion. And then this boy used a stick and his thumb to push together the male anthers and the female stigma of the vanilla flower, basically pollinating it efficiently. At least this is the story that is often told about how this hand pollination process was invented. It's extremely labor intensive and time consuming. And so that is in fact why it is the second most expensive spice worldwide topped only by saffron.

16:42 KIONA

So you're telling me that there's a vanilla and Madagascar and then there's like the original vanilla Mexico. So is that why there's like when I go to the ice cream store, there's Mexican vanilla and just regular vanilla?

16:56 LUIS

Vanilla now comes most likely from Madagascar or from Indonesia. But Mexico is still not the top vanilla producer in the world anymore, but still does it, right? And so it actually has a very different taste than other vanilla's worldwide. So Mexican vanilla is actually a very rich marriage of sweet and woody notes. And it also has a kind of deep spicy character. It has like notes of clove, of nutmeg. So there's definitely a little more spice like those flavors in it.

17:31 KIONA

And then the vanilla from Madagascar is what we're familiar with.

17:33 LUIS

Yes, exactly. It's a lot sweeter. It's creamier and has like a more mellow flavor than the Mexican one.

17:41 KIONA

Okay.

17:42 LUIS

So then if vanilla is so expensive, how come it's everywhere? I mean, there's a ton of very cheap vanilla flavored products like I can get a vanilla ice cream for one dollar.

17:50 KIONA

I was hoping you would ask that because now is the time to talk about vanilla.

17:55 LUIS

Okay. What's that? Vanilla is the main component in vanilla extract. And that is what gives vanilla its particular aroma.

18:06 KIONA

I thought it was going to be a villain like some people.

18:09 LUIS

Yeah, vanilla, the secret vanilla hoarder or something like that. And to satisfy global demand for vanilla, it was soon discovered that you could replicate the taste of vanilla by using only vanilla because it was much cheaper to collect. So, the funny thing is that vanilla is a key component in vanilla extract. But you still have to do the whole pollination by hand to get the vanilla to get the vanilla from that, right?

18:37 KIONA

So, why is it any cheaper?

18:40 LUIS

So it turns out that vanilla isn't only in vanilla. It can actually be found in a lot of other places. Nowadays most of it is synthetic and it's made from petrochemicals. But a significant amount of vanilla is actually still made the old fashioned way. It's taken from the waste produced by preparing wood pulp for paper.

18:59 KIONA

So my \$1 ice cream is basically me eating wood trash.

19:05 LUIS

Yeah, I guess so. But very flavorful wood trash.

19:11 KIONA

Yeah, I was going to say it tastes good and it's cheap.

19:13 LUIS

Yeah, and it's funny because there's tons of different ways to extract vanilla. And one of them is actually this, right? And that wasn't actually even the point of doing all of this. So when you prepare wood pulp for paper, this is just a byproduct, right? So they discovered that it was there and that you

could actually extract vanilla from there. So it's sort of like a happy accident that it happens to be found there as well.

19:38 KIONA

So most vanilla flavor products have no vanilla at all then?

19:41 LUIS

Isn't that amazing? Also I think it's kind of fascinating that one of the best ways to replicate the flavor of such an expensive and laborious plant is literally from the waste of another plant.

19:52 KIONA

So would you say that this is like a sustainable flavor? Like it's reusable.

19:57 LUIS

I mean, there are ways to do it very sustainably. I guess it's also true that a lot of vanilla is also synthetic and made from petrochemical. So there's that other side as well. But there are certainly more sustainable eco-friendly ways to extract vanilla apart from the vanilla bean.

20:14 KIONA

So why is vanilla being majority produced in Madagascar when it is so labor intensive? Like wouldn't it just be easier to produce a Mexico where they already have this bee?

20:24 LUIS

Yeah. So unfortunately there's a bit of a grim answer to that, which is that vanilla was produced in Madagascar while people were enslaved in Madagascar as well throughout the 19th century. And even after slavery was abolished there, of course poor working conditions continued to exist. And so that is why Madagascar is still currently such a top vanilla producer.

20:49 KIONA

So this brings me back to like, if it wasn't for the Totonacs, none of this would have happened.

20:54 LUIS

Yeah, exactly. And I'm glad you brought up the Totonacs because I think it's important to consider that they're actually still producing vanilla. So I mean, Mexico is no longer the vanilla powerhouse that it used to be. But it's quite beautiful that despite all the hardships because climate change has severely altered the ecosystems and the melipona bee has become more and more endangered, the Totonac people are actually still harvesting vanilla. And I think that it's beautiful to consider that they're still there doing what they've been doing for hundreds of years. And they're actually still managing to sell it worldwide and keeping the first form of vanilla cultivation alive. And in any case, going back to the beginning with the wacky flavors at the Dolores Hidalgo, you see what I mean by like vanilla being in fact the most interesting flavor there.

21:50 KIONA

A thousand percent. This was such a wild story.

21:54 LUIS

It's really cool that they make chicharron flavored ice cream, but like vanilla is really, really interesting.

22:01 KIONA

So vanilla ice cream, y'all, if you want to buy it, now you know the story.

22:06 LUIS

And it's anything but plain vanilla.

22:08 KIONA

And that's it for this episode.

22:15 LUIS

If you're still hungry for more, stick around and listen to our other episodes this season.

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22:22 LUIS

How not to travel is produced by Studio Ochenta and hosted by Dr. Kiona and me, Luis Lopez. Our executive producer is Lory Martinez. Production and sound design by me and Chiara Santella. Our production coordinator is Catalina Hoyos and our social media manager is Sofia Rodriguez. You can follow us on Instagram at @hownottotravelpod and at @ochentapodcasts. You can also find us on Twitter at @OchentaPodcasts and on TikTok at @studioochenta. Read more about the show and about our other productions on our website: ochentastudio.com. Thanks for listening and good provecho.