

Review of Prof. Rosa Abreu-Runkel's Talk: "Vanilla: A Global History"
Works in the Works Series, Humanities Department
February 27th, 2024

While the popularity of many flavors comes and goes, vanilla remains a classic and alluring choice. Whether in ice cream, cake, or a simple cup of coffee, vanilla is a captivating flavor that continues to be evoked and cherished across time and space. One may ask, however: What is vanilla? How did it spread to the entire world? Prof. Abreu-Runkel, Assistant Professor in the Hospitality Management Department, not only addressed these questions in detail, but also showcased the extensive research she undertook for her internationally acclaimed monograph *Vanilla: A Global History*, published by Reaktion Books in 2020. Abreu-Runkel's talk prompted the audience to embark on a fascinating journey from ancient to contemporary times through the lens of the most beloved and ubiquitous tastes and scents.

Deriving from an edible orchid flower, vanilla is a product in motion that has traversed oceans and cultures, acquiring various meanings and values across its global journey. With its earliest origins dating back seventy million years, when it was cultivated by the Totonacs in Ancient Mesoamerica, it transformed into a luxurious and highly prized spice during the Spanish colonization of the Americas, acquiring postcolonial implications around race and social class. Later, it progressively became fashionable in the Western world due to prominent figures like Thomas Jefferson, who popularized vanilla ice cream in the United States. Featuring legends, fables, and mythological symbolism, Prof. Abreu-Runkel thoroughly unveiled vanilla's origins, production methods, trade, and consumption.

Seductive and versatile, vanilla has performed a wide range of functions over time. Originally employed for medicinal practices and as a powerful aphrodisiac, it is now a widely consumed product that can be seen in perfumes, air fresheners, beverages, baking, cleaning supplies, cosmetics, and ice cream. It has also left an indelible mark on popular culture through representations in music, fashion, and art. Who would have thought that this little orchid, now so commonplace that it is often equated with the boring and mundane, played such a crucial role in the development of human civilization?

Through her illustrated talk, Abreu-Runkel ignited the audience with her contagious passion and expertise in food history. Unraveling the untold story of the seemingly simple, while highlighting the impact of aromas and flavors on everyday life, she recognized that vanilla is central to her childhood recollections from the Dominican Republic. It is inextricably linked to the women in her family who made exceptional dishes featuring the orchid fruit.

This was a delightful and informative talk that left the audience wanting to dig deeper into the rich history and mystery of vanilla – an essence that reconnects us to our own cultural traditions and culinary heritage. The Humanities Department particularly thanks Prof. Abreu-Runkel for her generosity in sharing delicious vanilla recipes. Surely, none of the attendees will take for granted next time they enjoy a vanilla flavor ice cream or light a vanilla-scented candle.

Review by Inés Corujo-Martín