



# Natural ingredient or nostalgic taste? Competing authenticities in the Norwegian vanilla tastescape

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## Abstract

Vanillin has been the main source of vanilla flavoring in products such as vanilla sugar, sauce and ice cream throughout the twentieth century, and hence the authentic taste Norwegians associated with vanilla. However, over the last twenty years critics have pointed out that this taste is not made from the seeds of the vanilla plant, but is synthetic and industrially produced. In this article we explore the multiple modes of attribution of authenticity within the Norwegian vanilla tastescape. Here we distinguish between phenomenological and objectivist claims of authenticity, and explore how these modes are articulated in diverse domains: From the public sphere through authors, bloggers, and influencers as well as within product development and national and supranational regulatory bodies.

## Keywords

Authenticity, taste, tradition, industrial food production, vanilla, vanillin

## Introduction

We have many consumer tests on ice cream. If we have a blind test, then people prefer vanillin and the known vanilla flavor. This is very fun to watch, because as soon as you start talking about it and tell that you have real vanilla seeds in a product then there is a great interest for natural vanilla. However, when tasting, people want it the way it has always been. After all, this is about traditions and nostalgia.

The above quotation, from an interview with a product developer from one of Norway's industrial food suppliers, expresses not just a particular professional dilemma, but points to the broader issue of authenticity of industrialized food. This produces competing notions of authenticity between a perceived traditional taste and a "natural" or "real" product posing a dilemma for the product developers who have to negotiate between these notions. Since the 2000s a discussion has emerged in Norway (and elsewhere) about which vanilla to use, and indeed, which vanilla should be considered the authentic one: Is it the taste of industrial *vanillin*, which is synthesized from clove oil, wood biomass or petrochemicals, or the taste of fermented *vanilla pods*, extracted from the vanilla orchid?

The coexistence of different modes of attribution of authenticity in the Norwegian vanilla tastescape allows us to explore assumptions regarding authenticity and food. As Theodossopoulos points out, it is precisely "context-specific conceptualizations of authenticity" that should be taken as the object of study, and as a way out of what he calls the "trap of authenticity" (Theodossopoulos, 2013: 344). Therefore, we do not strive to adjudicate authenticity, but rather explore different empirical modes of establishing it, focusing on how authenticity is built, and contested, and how different meanings are brought to play by the different significant actors involved, and particularly how these impinge on industrial product designers. In other words, we shift the question from "what is authentic" into how authenticity is made and perceived, and its effects.

The focus of the article is on product developers who are currently constructing a new and diversified version of the vanilla taste. However, they do not do so in isolation. These product developers inhabit and act upon a particular tastescape (Norwegian, vanilla) which can be understood as a complex taking in diverse agents such as consumers, cooks, influencers, supply chains, national and supranational organizations and food policy-makers, certification and standardization agencies, etc., as well as their cultural expectations, notions of taste, tradition, regulations and legislation, different processes (from production, supply, development, certification) and last but not least the characteristics and possibilities (as well as the political economy) of the ingredient itself, be it vanilla or vanillin. These inform how vanilla and vanillin-based products should be valued, assessed, labelled, marketed, sold and used. In turn, they are often grounded in more general assumptions about status, prestige, naturalness and economic gain. We deployed a multilayered research strategy into the Norwegian vanilla tastescape. In-depth interviews were carried out with ten product developers, representing over two-thirds of the companies involved in the production of vanilla and vanilla-flavored products in Norway. They were selected due to their roles as key decision-makers concerning which sources to utilize in order to make their products taste of vanilla. These interviews offer rare insights into the strategic considerations involved in the development of food products, particularly on the issue of authenticity of the vanilla taste, and consumer perception and preferences. However, issues surrounding competition and commercial secrecy have required that interview participants, company names, and product lines remain strictly anonymous.

We also incorporated relevant employees of the Norwegian Food Safety Authority (Matisynet) and the Norwegian Consumer Council (Forbrukerrådet) to encompass the understandings of government bodies involved in the regulation of food production and labeling. In addition, we interviewed journalist and writer Mats-Eric Nilsson, who has contributed to raising awareness in the Norwegian public sphere on food labeling, packaging and contents. We also made use of the posts of popular Norwegian food bloggers as a window into food trends and ideas surrounding the construction of authentic vanilla in Norway.

### **Competing authenticities: between a sense of taste and the origin of ingredients**

Charles Lindholm recognizes two modes of attributing authenticity: the “genealogical or historical (origin) and identity or correspondence (content). Authentic objects, persons, and collectives are original, real and pure; they are what they purport to be, their roots are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one.” (Lindholm, 2008: 2)

In the context of industrialized food, processes of certification, standardization and labeling (all underpinned by complex legal and contractual frameworks) intervene to bridge the distance between production, distribution and consumption. In each of these instances, different state, public, private, and scientific actors come into play (as it can be seen for example with the milk chain in Norway (Plasil, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), Iberian pigs in Spain (Cañas Bottos, 2019), and Mosel wine in Germany (Aspøy, 2019)). These are some of the means to establish a genealogy and attempt to build correspondence between essence and appearance in the modern food chain.

Lindholm’s distinction falls within an objectivist and etic standpoint. It allows for the adjudication of authenticity on the grounds of satisfaction of genealogy or correspondence. However, in order to be able to focus not on what is authentic, but how authenticity is made, perceived, contested and attributed, we need to incorporate vernacular, emic points of view which themselves are the adjudicators of authenticity, and turn them into our objects of study (Theodossopoulos, 2013). We therefore approach multiple modes of attribution of authenticity in the Norwegian vanilla tastescape by distinguishing between the phenomenological and the objectivist understandings (the latter a collapsing of Lindholm’s distinction) (Cañas Bottos & Plasil, 2021). Simply put, we distinguish between the authenticity of perceived taste by individual consumers on the one hand, and the authenticity of ingredients, tools, processes, and non-human actors on the other. We are aware, however, that authenticity has become a business in which products are tailored to satisfy different notions of authenticity (Gilmore & Pine, 2007), and the product developers we encountered were no exception. However, for us to conclude that those products are automatically inauthentic would be to fall into the “trap of authenticity” (Theodossopoulos, 2013), assuming the role of adjudicators and precluding us from examining how authenticity is constructed and negotiated.

Authenticity of taste is eminently and overtly cultural. The phenomenological understanding of authenticity depends directly on a socially constructed sense of taste. As a phenomenon, it is always dependent on a perceiving subject, with an appropriately and socio-culturally located sense of taste. Through blind tests, panels, discussion groups and even sales reports, product developers gain insights into the different ways in which their consumers interpret and adjudicate their products. The adjudication of authenticity is the product of a retrospective evaluation and comparison between what is being tasted and its success or lack thereof in evoking an appropriate repertoire of reactions, which can include

feelings and memories of the past. The lack of concrete referents for smell (Broch, 2014; Gell, 1977), which is crucial for the perception of flavor in conjunction with taste, allows a broad and sometimes arbitrary spectrum of potential referents. In this sense, authentic taste is often connected to ideas about home, origin, tradition and heritage that form a particular way of appreciation, stemming from how different people see themselves and how cultures and communities are defined and demarcated (Perales, 2016, p. 692). Sutton describes how the memory of taste and smell plays an important role in the remembrance of home (Sutton, 2001). Naguib shows how people revive a taste from a distant home (Naguib, 2006). Counihan (2009) explains how “Mexicanas” establish a sense of belonging and relationships through food and agriculture; while Pottier (2014) shows that the pursuit of an authentic national cuisine is connected to both globalization and the reconstruction of memories in a romantic manner.

This culturally generated sense of taste which adjudicates authenticity cannot be assumed to be homogeneously distributed, and is therefore subject to both synchronic and diachronic variability. The former expressed in competing and contested evaluations, while the latter become particularly visibly in immigrant populations showing how the authentic taste of food changes when ingredients to traditional dishes are unavailable and therefore replaced with ingredients accessible in the new country. After a short while the replacement becomes the authentic taste for the immigrant while the original is discarded as tasting “wrong” (Hage, 1997) (see also Cañas Bottos & Plasil, 2017, 2021).

In contrast, the objectivist sense is genealogical, and essentialist in its adjudication of authenticity. Authenticity lies not on the litmus test of the culturally constructed sense of taste, but on establishing appropriate connections to historical and putative origins, processes and essences (like the explanation of the presence of vanilla seeds in ice cream to a blind testing group).

Authenticity emerges from the successful articulation of foods, territory, and populations with an unchanging past, preferably pre-industrial and local, and therefore ingredients deemed “natural”. This corresponds with what Gilmore and Pine (2007: 49) call “natural authenticity”. In each cultural context, adjudication of authenticity is based on a (likewise synchronically and diachronically variable) repertoire of practices including techniques and recipes, but also inventory of raw materials and tools as well as infrastructures and non-human species. These objectivist discourses of authenticity highlight, evoke, and sometimes even invent the “natural,” pre-modern and pre-industrial origins. In a sense it is— despite its sometimes objectivist pretensions—culturally imagined. Two processes of invisibilization are at work in this invention of tradition and are worth mentioning here: naturalization (the invisibilization and misrecognition of history and human agency), and autochtonization (the invisibilization of origins and successive appropriation) (Cañas Bottos, 2019; Simonsen, 2019).

Processes of naturalization strive to hide or “traditionalize” processes of industrialization that make those foods possible. This attempt at the imputation of natural origins also has to succeed in remaining invisible. In popular culture, literature and the media, industrialized food is often deemed unnatural and inauthentic (Schatzker, 2015). Modern food has become an “unidentified edible object” (Fischler, 1988, p. 289) which has led to a quest for more authentic, natural food. The implicit pre-industrial referent of food authenticity, together with the dominant metaphors that pose the “natural” in opposition to the “industrial,” and the “real” in opposition to the “fake,” limits the possibility of adjudicating authenticity to industrial food products. This poses particular challenges for vanilla and vanillin-flavored product developers and producers aiming to satisfy their consumers’ “desire for products that are ‘real’

and ‘authentic’, as opposed to the image of foods mass-manufactured in a window-less factory” (Johnston & Baumann, 2015). The “window-less factory,” where mass-production takes place in disconnection from its environment, emerges as the antithesis of authenticity.

Two competing modes of authenticity attribution take place in connection with a particular environment. On the one hand, when the genealogical link can be established like a protected denomination of origin, and authenticity might even become “certifiable,” increasing the visibility of the connection. On the other hand, due to industrialization, globalization and new production technologies, food can be produced and consumed away from the locality where it originated (Stoilova, 2015). In a process of de-location, linkages and intermediary processes that make the product available far from its origin might be invisibilised and the product appropriated and “autochtonized”, thus becoming part of local imagined cultural repertoires. Through de-location processes, the taste of vanilla left its home and spread around the world, becoming part of food cultures elsewhere. In the next section we briefly outline the history of the vanilla flavor and its autochtonization into the Norwegian foodscape.

## From plant to petrol – the historical expansion of synthetic vanilla flavoring

Historically, the flavor of vanilla was extracted from the fruits of vanilla orchids, called vanilla beans. These were dried, cured, or processed in other ways to produce the aromatic taste of vanilla. Today, three species of orchids are used in the production of this flavor: *Vanilla planifolia*, *Vanilla tahitiensis* and *Vanilla pompona*. All three were originally endemic to Mexico, and the taste was, therefore, not known to Europeans until the discovery of the Americas. The Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés is often credited with having introduced *Chocolatl*, the Aztec chocolate beverage, to the Europeans in the early sixteenth century. In addition to chocolate, this drink contained vanilla. Europeans quickly came to like the taste of vanilla and therefore the importation of dried vanilla beans had to be increased. To satisfy the growing demand, vanilla orchids were transported and grown in a variety of tropical areas where the plants could thrive. Plantations were established in European colonies such as Tahiti, Madagascar and Indonesia during subsequent centuries. (Fache et al., 2016; Rain, 2004)

Beans from vanilla orchids were the only source of vanilla flavoring until 1858, when French biochemist Nicolas-Theodore Gobley isolated the vanillin molecule and identified it as providing the chief flavor component of the vanilla taste (Fache et al., 2016). Almost two decades later, in 1874, the German chemists Ferdinand Tiemann and Wilhelm Haarmann deduced the chemical structure of vanillin. After the molecule and its structure became known, several methods were developed to extract it from sources other than vanilla orchids. Vanillin is present in such varying materials as clove oil, paper pulp and petroleum. In the 1930s, byproducts from the paper industry became the main source for producing chemically fabricated vanillin. However, since petrochemical products became available in abundance, the production processes shifted. Today, about 90 percent of synthetic vanillin is derived from petroleum-based sources.<sup>1</sup>

Producing vanilla from orchids is demanding and expensive. The production of one kilo of vanillin requires roughly 500 kilos of vanilla beans, which in turn requires the pollination

1. See “Vanilje” in: Store norske leksikon (Norwegian Encyclopedia). <https://snl.no/vanilje> (accessed June 26th, 2019)

of about 40,000 orchid flowers (Gallage & Møller, 2015). Pollination is a lengthy and arduous process, as the physiology of the plants normally necessitates pollination by hand (Rain, 2004). Additionally, the market price and availability of vanilla beans are highly unpredictable. At times, tropical storms and other weather conditions cause severe damage to large areas of orchid plantations, as can fungi and diseases. Further, most plantations are located in politically unstable areas, which leads to unexpected drops in market availability in periods of turmoil (Gallage & Møller, 2015). Due to the expense and the market unpredictability of vanilla beans, producers of vanilla products such as ice cream and yoghurt generally preferred to use synthetic vanillin once it became available. Today, less than one percent of products labelled ‘vanilla flavor’ contain vanilla from orchid beans (Fache et al., 2016; Gallage & Møller, 2015). The synthetic production of vanillin made the taste of vanilla affordable and hence available to the broader (Norwegian) population.

According to several producers of vanilla products, vanillin has been used “since the origin of times” and is the “typical taste for the Norwegian palate”. Vanillin has been used in vanilla sugar, vanilla ice cream, vanilla sauce and vanilla custard and has therefore been the dominant vanilla taste for many decades. However, the authenticity of the taste traditionally associated with vanilla has been challenged not only by celebrity chefs, food bloggers and the media but also by consumer organizations and even the European Union, as the section below will show.

## Disclosing facts about vanillin

In the 2000s, something shifted in Norwegian ideas about vanilla. Several statements that destabilized the association between synthetic vanillin and the taste of vanilla appeared in Norwegian media, cookbooks and blogs. The conceptualization of the “authentic” taste of vanilla was changing and the use of vanillin was criticized within certain segments of the population. These statements often followed the logics of disclosure, where the expert, blogger or journalist revealed that a well-known and beloved product such as ice cream in fact contains ‘saw dust’ or petroleum (see below). This was then often followed by the argument that vanilla stemming from the vanilla orchid was not only the natural and therefore authentic one, but also superior in taste.

In *Den hemmelige kokken (The Secret Cook)*, Mats-Eric Nilsson (2007) focused on the contrast between vanilla and vanillin, disclosing that the latter was derived from rotten trees. The book, which was first published in Sweden, seems to have had a significant impact on common understandings of food. According to the Norwegian publisher Spartacus, the book caused “a small food revolution” in Sweden. In an interview with the author, he explained his reasoning, pointing directly at the lack of correspondence between essence and appearance:

The main problem is that it is fake. I do not argue that all this is dangerous. I do not say that vanilla is a dangerous additive or anything like that. My main objection to the use of additives is that you use it as a kind of cosmetic to cover the fact that you do not have enough of the real ingredient. And this is how you lure the consumer in.

In the aftermath of the release of *Den hemmelige kokken*, further disclosures and discussions followed. VG, one of Norway’s largest newspapers, reported an “ice-cold surprise” in 2009. Under the headline “Yum... sawdust ice-cream,” the newspaper revealed that “When you eat ice-cream in the summer heat, you are most likely chewing on Norwegian

spruce”.<sup>2</sup> This logic of disclosure and concern is also found in blogs, social media and internet discussion forums. One example is the internet forum discussion that took place on the VG website. Concerned consumers thought it not only *ekkelt* (disgusting) to think of vanillin as coming from rotten trees (which, according to one respondent, belong in the compost and not on the table), but they were concerned that these artificial ingredients would lead to allergies and even ADHD among their children.<sup>3</sup>

Consumers concerned with the quality of vanilla-flavored products found support among cooks and writers. One example is Norwegian food writer and blogger Margit Vea<sup>4</sup>, who on May 24th, 2011 wrote in her blog:

Even the most expensive chocolates and the most luxurious ice creams are flavored with artificial vanilla flavors, which are extracted from rotten spruce and used instead of the more expensive seed pods of the vanilla orchid, *Vanilla planifolia*. [...]. This fake product should be avoided as the excessive vanilla-like flavor destroys the food and destroys children’s taste buds. [...]. More children react negatively (become restless, get rashes...) to vanillin and/or ethyl-vanillin. There is a documented risk of allergy when consuming artificial vanilla flavor. Therefore, according to Norwegian law, the product must be labeled according to which of the two vanilla flavors is used.<sup>5</sup>

The two notions of authenticity are wound up in this blog entry. The objectivist sense of authenticity is seen adjudicating differential values to vanillin and vanilla: the authenticity of origin, the vanilla orchid versus the “fake product” based on “rotten spruce”. The former is rhetorically objectified and naturalized by referring to it by its scientific name, hiding all intermediary processes between the plant and the plate (which often includes fermentation, thus conveniently hidden), at the same time as inedibility is imputed on the latter via the “rotten” qualification of spruce (an equally natural product, although unlike vanilla we are not given its Latin name); it is even purported to have negative effects on health as well as it destroys children’s “tastebuds”. There is no evidence presented on the literal interpretation of the meaning, whether it is the physiological destruction of the tastebuds or of the culturally constructed sense of taste of children during the very age of its construction, which will then be unable to phenomenologically adjudicate authenticity to the natural product. By focusing on the negative effects on the most vulnerable (children), it strengthens and legitimizes a call on the state to regulate labeling, while a high price point is no guarantee of obtaining the natural product.

Besides the disclosure literature, there are also blogs and cookbooks that promote the superiority of the vanilla flavor derived from vanilla orchids. One example is *Trines matblogg* (Trine’s food blog)<sup>6</sup>. In a post with the headline “Completely real vanilla sugar,” the blog informs readers that “real vanilla sugar is made from vanilla beans”<sup>7</sup>. It also describes in detail the process which is required to develop the “unique” vanilla taste from vanilla beans:

When the pods are harvested it can take about half a year, and after a meticulous process of fermentation and drying, before the vanilla bean has acquired its characteristic appearance – and the delicious unique taste that is only found in authentic vanilla.<sup>8</sup>

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2. VG. 07.08.2009. All citations in the Norwegian articles have been translated from Norwegian to English by the authors.
  3. <https://vgd.no/forbruker/mat-og-drikke/tema/1429608/tittel/vaniljesmak-er-laget-av-raattent-toemmer>
  4. Almost 6000 followers on Facebook, more than 2500 followers on Instagram
  5. <https://margitvea.no/blogg/kunstig-vanilje-i-alle-varer/>
  6. Close to 110,000 followers on Facebook.
  7. Trines matblogg. 30.11.2010.
  8. Ibid.

Notice how the processing of the orchid beans is presented as a careful procedure which is later contrasted with the industrial and “dirty” connotations of vanillin, with origins in “rotten bark and cow dung”<sup>9</sup>. The concepts of “real” and “authentic” are repeated throughout the blog post: “Authentic vanilla is so infinitely much better than synthetically produced vanilla taste! So, when you cook or make a dessert yourself, you can treat yourself with the real thing, right?”<sup>10</sup>.

The website *oppskrift.klikk.no* (recipe.click.no) and the blog *Mjuuugly.blog.no*, which both describe how you can buy and use vanilla beans, are other examples of the promotion of natural vanilla. Among the readers’ comments on the latter, we also get insight into conceptualizations of vanilla taste that is less represented in more formal fora: “Vanillin is the devil’s work, no doubt. I have bought real vanilla on ebay and been very happy. ... Remember ‘aroma’ can also hide this shit. ... Oh, they [yoghurts containing aroma] are so disgusting.”<sup>11</sup>

We were not able to find similar references to disgust towards vanillin in contrast to vanilla that predated this debate. They seem rather to be a consequence of the “disclosure literature” rather than its cause.

These quotes highlight several issues concerning the use of industrial vanillin. First, that vanillin has obscure and even disgusting origins. It is argued that the source, although natural (from trees), is not the real thing, as well as being “rotten,” which of course is not something one usually likes to put in one’s mouth (even though real vanilla pods from orchids are fermented). To choose between the terms “rotten” or “fermented” is to highlight on which side of the edibility boundary the product in question is supposed to stand. The second argument is that the use of vanillin not only destroys (children’s) tastebuds and alters consumers’ perceptions of flavor but that it is even potentially dangerous (allergies and ADHD). The third argument is that by calling products “vanilla” and putting pictures of vanilla orchids on the package, the producers are misleading the consumers by presenting their products as something they are not. All three arguments center around the dichotomy “natural = authentic” versus “synthetic = fake,” proclaiming the vanilla orchid as the only true, natural and authentic source of vanilla taste in our food. This dichotomy touches upon many issues in modern-day food production where consumers and producers must deal with different and differing tastes, changing foodways, more or less media-hyped food trends, and the question of trusting what you eat.

It is not unlikely that this statement is more representative of discourses related to food identity politics and practices of distinction. Bourdieu (1986) reminded us that tastes are markers of distinction and are linked to prestige—the “taste of luxury” meaning that someone can afford to eat expensive, imported rather than cheap, mass-produced vanilla. Food has always been a marker for distinction (Goody, 1982; Sutton, 2010), so the recent trend towards more authentic but also more expensive vanilla can also be seen in this light. Certain consumers of vanilla-flavored products in Norway want to be seen to be eating natural vanilla even though many might prefer synthetic vanillin. The quest for distinction in a naturally scarce product is a threat to a tradition built on an industrial “replacement”.

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9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Mjuuugly.blogg.no 27.09.2013 (Accessed: 17.02.2019)

## Authenticity and trust

The reconstruction of authentic vanilla in Norway in the 2000s is part of a broader international trend in the way food is conceptualized. This discourse is founded on a critique of modern industrialized food production and proclaims that food should be natural and therefore authentic. Slow-food movements (originating in Italy and from there spreading across Europe) and writers such as Pollan (2006), Schlosser (2001), Lawrence (2004) and Olmsted (2016) have been central to the formation of these ideas. Food scandals such as BSE have eroded consumers' trust in the food industry and authorities (Kjærnes et al., 2007) and being made aware that vanilla sauce is based on "rotten trees" does not particularly help consumers' trust in well-loved products. Kjærnes, Harvey and Warde identify consumers' trust not only as something relational and social but also as a "critical condition for consumers when they enter into routinized and stabilized patterns of buying, self-provisioning and consuming (ibid: 25).

In 2012 the Norwegian Consumer Council (Forbrukerrådet) published the report *Do we know what we're eating? A review of food on Norwegian stores' shelves by the Norwegian Consumer Council*. The report attempts to tackle consumers skepticism "of modern food production, and there is a trend in our society that consumers increasingly require cleaner and more natural food."<sup>12</sup> When addressing product content on ice cream and desserts:

We found that many products are completely different from what they pretend to be. Generally, the products we found contain very little of what they claim to contain and that in this category the range of additives really starts to grow long. We found marzipan cake without almonds, vanilla sauce without vanilla and almond pudding without almonds. [...] All you can be sure is that when it says "with vanilla flavor," there is no vanilla in the product.<sup>13</sup>

Note not only the lack of correspondence between appearance and content, but also (as in the quotation above) the recognition of weasel words (in this case, "flavor"), implying vanilla but denoting its absence. These weasel words promise the phenomenological experience of vanilla while simultaneously hiding the absence of objectivist-based authenticity.

An employee of the Consumer Agency told us: "We want a strict approach to labeling. If the product is manufactured and gives an impression of containing something it does not contain, this is incorrect. [...] Maybe one simple thing is not so crucial, but it is the sum here that is crucial, and if there is too much confusion then the trust is lost." What starts out as a clear call to principles quickly moves into fuzziness, shifting from the objectivist fact regarding presence or absence of a crucial ingredient, to the interpretive fluidity of an impression of the totality.

Back in 2012 when the report from the Consumer Agency stirred up the discussion, many producers argued that their practices were not against the law and that their products had always been produced using synthetic vanillin. They were backed up by the Food Safety Authority of Norway (Mattilsynet), which argued that several products, including vanilla ice cream and vanilla sauce, would fall under the "custom clause" (*sedvane*). This gave products such as Tine "Piano" vanilla sauce, which has been produced and sold since 1971, a customary status, allowing the company to continue call the product vanilla sauce or vanilla ice cream even though it did not contain any natural vanilla. As such, the Norwegian authorities gave a "synthetic and industrial" product an "authentic and traditional" status on the grounds of "custom," thus, "naturalizing" and simultaneously autochthonizing it on the

12. Forbrukerrådet. *Vet vi hva vi spiser? En gjennomgang fra Forbrukerrådet av mat i norske butikkyllere*. S. 3. 2012.

13. <https://www.forbrukerradet.no/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Rapport-om-mat-i-butikkhyllene.pdf>

grounds of tradition. This, however, did not solve the dilemma as both the laws and the public opinion kept changing.

In 2014, EU regulation 1169/2011 was made obligatory not only in the EU member states but also in Norway, as a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), which led to stricter rules for labelling and the obligation to be more informative on ingredients (especially allergens). Article 7 of the regulation states<sup>14</sup>:

Fair information practice

1. Food information shall not be misleading, particularly:
  - a. as to the characteristics of the food and, in particular, as to its nature, identity, properties, composition, quantity, durability, country of origin or place of provenance, method of manufacture or production;
  - b. by attributing to the food effects or properties which it does not possess;
  - c. by suggesting that the food possesses special characteristics when in fact all similar foods possess such characteristics, in particular by specifically emphasizing the presence or absence of certain ingredients and/or nutrients;
  - d. by suggesting, by means of the appearance, the description or pictorial representations, the presence of a particular food or an ingredient, while in reality a component naturally present or an ingredient normally used in that food has been substituted with a different component or a different ingredient.
2. Food information shall be accurate, clear and easy to understand for the consumer.

It is notable how this regulation not only focuses solely on securing an objectivist approach to evaluate the food in question—nature, properties, composition, place, process—while it simultaneously precludes explicit mention of items that might inform a phenomenological assessment of authenticity, particularly on food effects and properties.

One ice cream producer explained the law in the following way:

In fact, with the new rules, when we adhere to the European standard, they say that even if you have mainly real vanilla seeds in your product, but you put just a tiny bit of vanillin, then you cannot call it vanilla ice cream. This is how strict they are. [...] So, in the future we will have to call it vanilla flavor instead of vanilla.

These EU regulations are not only put in place to give consumers correct and appropriate information but also as a way of standardizing products throughout the common market. Standards tell us about “moral, political, economic and technical authority” (Busch, 2013 (2011)) and once established (often after a phase of conflict or disagreement) they “structure our expectations, because standards, like the world of nature, are seemingly ‘supposed’ to be the way they are” (ibid: 33). While the Norwegian Food Safety Authority had accepted and set the customary standard vanilla flavor on the basis of synthetic vanillin, the more recent EU regulation challenges this decision and makes the use of natural vanilla the standard.

14. <https://lovdata.no/pro/#document/CLX3/eu/32011r1169?searchResultContext=1023&rowNumber=1&totalHits=206> (accessed November 22, 2018)

## The producers' dilemma: caught between regulations, trust and taste

For years, sauce or ice cream based on vanillin had been trusted and routinely bought. Now, there has been a challenge to trust and therefore a challenge to buying routines and consumer perceptions. Consumers had been made aware that the *real thing is out there* and that the synthetic version might even have dangerous implications for their health and tastebuds.

Yes, we do see that the consumers have become more attentive. Consumers are becoming more informed. Particularly young consumers, they are both more critical and better informed. They expect more information about things. And we see that after such news stories about vanilla products, there was an avalanche of inquiries on Facebook.

We started feeling the heat when that issue made the news. This or that company did not put real vanilla in the product that everyone used and everyone ate and everyone loved so much.

Producers of vanilla-flavored products were challenged by consumers, media, bloggers, cooks and even the Consumer Agency regarding new understandings of established food products. Natural ingredients rather than the taste of yesteryear became the trend of the day. Or in other words, objectivist authenticity was making ground at the expense of phenomenological authenticity. Somehow this can be considered a “luxury problem” as it is only since Norway has become an affluent consumer society that it is possible to have a discussion about which vanilla to use, as real, as for most consumers natural vanilla simply used to be unaffordable and unavailable, as one producer confirmed:

When these products were developed, real vanilla was not as present as it is now, it was expensive, and it was common to use vanillin in such products. And that's what consumers associate with the flavor of vanilla. Their reference has been vanillin.

Therefore, being used to vanillin rather than vanilla, what consumers say they want and what their preferred taste is are often two different things, posing a dilemma for product developers.

The EU regulation is challenging for producers not only from a financial viewpoint (natural vanilla is far more expensive than synthetic vanillin) but also from a taste perspective. This brings us to the question of consumer taste preferences, and how these different modes of attribution of authenticity pose a dilemma for product developers:

If you ask the consumers what products they would like to buy, they say real and natural products. But when they really buy, they prefer products that are best to taste, what they have grown up with, the flavor that is known and loved. This is probably what they experience as natural. This is what they are used to.

We have many consumer tests on ice cream. If we have a blind test, then people prefer vanillin and the familiar vanilla flavor. This is very fun to watch, because as soon as you start talking about it and tell that you have real vanilla seeds in a product then there is a great interest in natural vanilla. However, when tasting, people want it the way it always has been. After all, this is about traditions and nostalgia.

These product developers were unknowingly pointing at what Malinowski wrote a century ago—the divergence between reported and actual behavior. Consumers say they want to eat real, natural vanilla but then prefer the taste of vanillin. In support, most producers told us that the products based on natural vanilla are not responsible for a great deal of revenue among their vanilla product lines. Vanillin succeeds in the phenomenological test of

authenticity, while appeals to objectivist notions of origin elicit verbal agreements (while not necessarily opening consumers' wallets).

Several producers attributed this craving for real vanilla to a trend towards authenticity, towards natural products and perhaps also towards expensive and exclusive products, an act of aspiration and distinction. Producers told us, "Consumers jump from thing to thing," and "it is just super-chefs, gourmet cooks, who tell you that only real vanilla tastes good". The argument was that one would perhaps need real vanilla for high-end cooking, but not for everyday use—therefore product developers found ways to reconstruct the taste of vanilla by diversifying their vanilla product supply and by combining familiar flavors with fresh appearances.

## **The producers' reaction: how to deal with trust, flavor, and trends**

In comparison, vanillin is easier and cheaper to produce and use than vanilla. Not only is vanilla the world's second most expensive ingredient (after saffron), its nature and texture (seeds) make its handling in industrialized food production challenging. Several producers told us about the "dry after taste" of natural vanilla, its explosive taste profile (one seed gives a sudden burst of taste) and the problems of distributing its flavor equally and evenly within a product such as ice cream or vanilla sauce. Even worse, natural vanilla taste will change over time, as one ice cream producer told us:

If you use vanilla seeds, then that flavor will change over time. Because ice cream is alive, it has sugar and many other ingredients, and they move around even in a frozen condition. And then the aroma in the seeds will spread out differently over time. So, then you will have ice cream tasting differently after two weeks than after six months, and that is not OK.

The natural behavior of ice cream and vanilla beans clash with learnt expectations of standardization and homogeneity of industrial products. To adapt to these challenges of diverging consumer wants and tastes and the characteristics of natural vanilla, product developers have come up with alternatives and are constructing a new version of vanilla, combining taste and look in one product in order to reconcile the two notions of authenticity. In their efforts to accommodate both authenticity as a successful evocation of nostalgic taste and objectivist authenticity based on natural ingredients, and to bridge the gap between what people want and what they say they want, product developers created new versions of vanilla products, tricking consumers' eyes and tastebuds. The "explosive" vanilla taste is extracted from the vanilla seeds and these tasteless seeds are then added to a product flavored either with extract from real vanilla or synthetic vanillin. Three producers described the process:

Just to give this visual effect and then we can advertise it as vanilla seeds. You don't have to say that the taste has been removed. And we see that the customers prefer it. Sometimes the customer, not that they like to be tricked—that I can't say—but yes, they like to be pleased in a simple way.

We have vanilla, we have extract but also vanillin. Yes, so it is a mix and then there are also vanilla seeds. And there are quite complex components in the vanillin and vanilla extract mixture, so there is much that influences in order to get the right taste.

This is our challenge, we can't get the flavor that the consumer expects of vanilla until we add some vanillin.

As we see here, the strategy involves a dual process. First, to satisfy the need for natural, authentic vanilla, real yet tasteless vanilla seeds are added for “the nice look,” as one producer called it. This can be seen as adding seeds to the products to accommodate the understanding of objectivist authenticity through natural ingredients, albeit metonymically. Second, by replacing the taste of the seeds with synthetic vanillin and/or extract from vanilla, making it taste like the vanilla products consumers are accustomed to and giving it the traditional taste of yesteryear to accommodate the phenomenological understanding of authenticity, and thus, satisfying the demand for “natural” authenticity through the eyes, and “nostalgic” authenticity through the sense of taste.

These combination products often form the middle line in a diversified and hierarchized assortment of vanilla products. There are the above-named middle-shelf combination products, there are bottom-shelf, everyday products based on vanillin alone, and there are top-shelf products exclusively containing natural vanilla. Examples are Tine’s “Piano Fyldig Vanilla Sauce” and “Inspira” ice cream by Hennig Olsen, both containing only natural vanilla and both being small branches in the product tree. The need for EU standardization of food labels has led to a diversification of products and the necessity to read the label more carefully. One producer explained: “It is necessary to classify what we mean with premium product then—it is simply to make a clearer distinction.” And he continues: “It’s a completely different taste. I think it’s a great thing to educate consumers, that there are differences. For many people, ice cream is ice cream, but we have created our own quality hierarchy, so to speak, with our products. So, then it is our job to teach the consumer to appreciate it.” Consumers can now choose which flavor and price they prefer depending on their actual needs and tastes.

## **Conclusion: What you taste is not what you see**

Product developers within the Norwegian vanilla tastescape confront two different challenges arising from competing notions of authenticity. First, contrary to assumptions that link authenticity in food with autochthony and pre-industrial products, in this context, the perceived traditional vanilla taste comes from an industrial product (vanillin). This association was created due to vanillin being more accessible and affordable and therefore used almost exclusively for vanilla-flavored products. Therefore, the taste of popular products like ice cream and vanilla sauce became strongly linked to the taste of vanillin, thus shaping the vanilla taste people in Norway know and expect. This was confirmed in the producers’ blind tests, as the sense of authentic taste was successfully triggered by the industrial vanillin, rather than by that provided by the vanilla bean.

Secondly, the challenge of navigating the changing regulatory frameworks in Norway and the EU when it comes to the labelling of products. Norwegian consumer protection called for both strictness and fuzziness in labelling, while governmental agencies legitimized the usage of the term “vanilla” for labelling certain industrial products that only contain vanillin on the grounds of tradition, which later EU regulations contradicted. Product developers reacted creatively by diversifying offerings which provided real vanilla, vanillin, or a combination. But what was particularly ingenious was the development of recipes where flavorless natural vanilla beans are added to feed the eye’s craving for “naturalness” while artificial vanillin continued to be used to trigger the appropriate sense of authentic taste. In the Norwegian vanilla tastescape, what you taste does not always correspond with what you see.

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