

# The Zest S11E11

**Stephanie:** [00:00:00] Once I started selling vanilla, I have not heard one person say they don't like vanilla. They don't like the smell of it. It's always that. It's always, we love vanilla. It's my favorite. You know, it's my favorite vanilla lip balm. It's my favorite body oil. It's my favorite skincare.

**Dalia:** I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and Southern charm.

The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State today. Do you smell that? Florida's new signature scent just might be vanilla.

A few weeks ago here on the pod Chef Justin Timineri of Fresh from Florida, told us about some of his favorite trending agricultural products coming out of the sunshine state, and one in particular made me gasp: vanilla. You can almost. Smell it right? That warm, sweet, comforting scent that reminds you of baking chocolate chip cookies or maybe lighting your favorite [00:01:00] candle.

Now, Stephanie Webb knows that aroma all too well. As the founder and owner of Sunshine State Vanilla, she cultivates and sells vanilla plants, grown on a farm on Pine Island in Lee County. She also has a line of vanilla. Scented kitchen and bath products, and they smell divine. Trust me. Now predominantly grown in Africa and South America.

Vanilla is starting to flourish here in Florida, thanks to folks like Stephanie and her partners, which include local farmers and researchers. The Zest team recently met up with Stephanie. In our conversation, she shares what led to her interest in vanilla, why the plants beans are so darn expensive, and her favorite sweet and savory ways to cook with vanilla.

Stephanie also explains why Florida is a perfect place to grow vanilla plants and to host the inaugural Florida Vanilla Symposium, which takes place this Saturday, [00:02:00] April 12th, 2025 at Fallen Oak Farms in Valrico. It's open to the public, and I know you're curious, so you'll find a link. In our show notes or on our website, the zest podcast.com.

Now here's my conversation with Stephanie Webb.

**Stephanie:** If I rewind all the way back to what my day job has been for 20 years, it's been a nutraceutical formulator. And that basically means that, uh,

when you go into Whole Foods and you see those elderberry gummies or electrolytes or sports drinks, I formulate those.

From the botanical side of things. So if somebody says, I need, you know, a powder for sleep aid or if I need something for immune boosting properties, I'm the one that they turn to. I've worked for a lot of different companies doing this kinds of things, and I work with food scientists and chemists as well.

And so that kind led me down this sourcing industry because. When you, you know, think of [00:03:00] a great product, you might not actually be able to get the ingredients in, you know, that are needed for these large clients. And so that led me to, I was looking for vanilla. Organic CO2 extract in, I think it was 2019 and it was kind of right around the time Covid started happening and everything was shutting down and I couldn't get a hold of international suppliers.

It was really difficult, so I kind of went down this rabbit hole and reached out to somebody that was doing vanilla research at the University of Florida in Miami. And he kind of blew my mind with saying, oh, you know, vanilla, we've been, you know, studying vanilla for years here in Florida and it grows really well and you know, it's been found in the Everglades.

And I had no idea. I was like, what? There's native vanilla growing in Florida and I'm from Florida. It kind of like. Kept me up at night. You know, it was one of those things that I was like [00:04:00] at four in the morning, still googling, going, I had no idea why isn't anybody growing vanilla. And so it was one of those like, why not me moments of I'm gonna, I wanna grow some vanilla.

Like, why not? So I found a good source of vanilla planifolia, which is the kind that. Is, they're all edible, but we can consume it and it's the most popular type of vanilla. And I had that, it's been naturalized to Florida, so we know it's growing really well here. And I had it tissue cultured and offered at large scale, and so I've been selling vanilla to farmers for about five years now.

**Dalia:** Wow. Yeah. What are the farmers doing with it?

**Stephanie:** They're growing it. I mean, we're, we've got a nice little tight-knit community of people that are. Growing vanilla, you know, it's kind of, there's a learning curve to it and it takes a couple of years for it to start producing beans. So between this spring and next spring, in about a year, we will really know how many beans we're we've got and how well it's [00:05:00] doing and all of that.

So, so yeah, it's a, it's been a really fun journey for the most part of learning about how to grow it in Florida. And I think, honestly, once we actually have. Lots of beans to share and sell. It's gonna kind of, you know, get huge. Honestly, people are gonna be like, whoa, I had no idea. You know, we don't have anything to show for it quite yet.

We've had 'em in the ground now for three or four years, and my personal farm was washed away and Ian, so I had to replant. So I'm a little bit behind some of my other farmers, but we're all working together and everybody gets along and it's been a fun. Adventure.

**Dalia:** Where is your farm located?

**Stephanie:** It's in Lee County, so it's south on Pine Island.

**Dalia:** Oh, nice.

**Stephanie:** Mm-hmm.

**Dalia:** I agree that I don't think of Florida as being a place where vanilla typically grows, as you said, but there have been so many crops that have surprised me over the years with this podcast. Like we went to Brooksville and there's a place called the Olive Grove, and that opened my eyes to how many people [00:06:00] are growing olives here in the state.

Yeah, and vanilla could be that next thing. Yes. I actually ordered some vanilla beans. A few months ago to give as holiday gifts. Yes. And I made my own vanilla extract. Great. With vanilla beans and vodka. And let it sit in my closet for like six months. Exactly. And everybody went, yep. You did it Crazy. Went crazy.

Mm-hmm. It was, it was so easy. I have to do it again now, so it'll be ready for next. Christmas. Yeah, but those beans that I ordered, I bet they didn't come from Florida. So where, where do we typically get our vanilla beans?

**Stephanie:** So typically vanilla comes from Madagascar, Uganda, South America. There's, there's a couple of, you know, countries that are really well known for vanilla and sometimes it's done really well and the beans are beautiful.

But a lot of times, you know, it's kind of. Is similar to, like, I liken it to like the blood diamond industry. There's a lot of trauma and things happening in that

industry that is not sustainable and it's difficult. And so, you know, [00:07:00] in Florida domestically we're able to really practice. Regenerative farming and organics, and we also have a, a native pollinator.

So there's a lot of things that are really looking positive for Florida growers.

**Dalia:** Why do you think so many farmers are interested in buying vanilla from you?

**Stephanie:** Well, honestly, like I, there's, there's a lot of reasons, but I think people like to have the connections to their food now. And that's more and more growing in popularity.

Agritourism is growing in popularity and, you know, knowing that I, I think most people don't even know that that vanilla comes from a beautiful orchid vine. You know, that's something that I didn't even, I didn't even think about it. You just pick up a vanilla bean and you think, oh, it's a bean. You don't really think much about it, but it actually is a beautiful orchid that natively grows in trees, has a beautiful blossom, you know, bloom. And then it produces these beans and it normally, it has to [00:08:00] be hand pollinated, uh, which makes it extremely, extremely expensive because the labor costs are extraordinary

**Dalia:** so that's why it's so expensive. Okay. How expensive is it?

**Stephanie:** Well, I mean that depends on where you get it from.

It depends on the season, depends on the crops. And a lot of times these beans overseas tend to be picked early so that they can be the first ones to get the financial incentive. You know, first ones to market. And so they don't always develop their flavors like they should or their. Aromatic qualities.

And so when they're left on the vine to fully develop, or you know, they're not picked early, sometimes they're sprayed with vain. And vain is the chemical in vanilla that that occurs naturally, that makes it that sweet vanilla flavor. And sometimes when they're picked early, the Van Andin does not. Uh, have the ability to develop fully.

And so they spray it with a synthesized [00:09:00] mandolin. And a lot of times, I think they actually said too, I've seen reports that say about 87 or 90% vanilla flavored products are not actually real vanilla. It's synthesized. Oh, I know. So imagine if we were able to help support. Farmers in, in America domestically and with America is the top buyer of vanilla products.

You know, you think about not only vanilla in the body care industry, you know?

**Dalia:** Oh, I didn't even think about that. Yeah. Okay. My daughter's 12. Yes. Vanilla is her favorite scent from lotion. Bath. Yeah. Products,

**Stephanie:** all of it. Everybody. You know, I honestly, I have never really thought much about vanilla because it's. It's everywhere. It's very common. But once I started selling vanilla, I have not heard one person say they don't like vanilla. They don't like the smell of it. It's always that. It's always, we love vanilla. It's my favorite. You know, it's my favorite vanilla lip balm. It's my favorite body [00:10:00] oil. It's my favorite skincare.

It's my favorite granola bar. You know, it's like, it's Yeah. Candles,

**Dalia:** right? You're right. It is everywhere. Yeah. And, and maybe that's why people say things like, oh, it was vanilla. Mm-hmm. It was kind of just like ubiquitous. Yes. Yes. Yes. Interesting. Yeah. Okay. You mentioned synthetic vanilla. Yes. Versus real vanilla.

I almost feel like I'm talking to like a sommelier about wine. You know what I mean? Right? Yes. So, yes. So is it possible to put into words what a good vanilla tastes like or smells

**Stephanie:** like? Oh my gosh. You know, it's hard to put into words, but from my perspective, because I have worked in laboratories for a long time and I look at the chemistry of plants.

That is my day-to-day job is I look to see, has it been adulterated or what? You know, this lavender coming from France looks chemically different from the lavender coming from Bulgaria. Like I can tell where plants are developing from their chemistry. So from a chemistry standpoint, vanilla has [00:11:00] such a depth of different, you know.

Chemicals. It has these smoky flavors, these sweet manin. That's the chemical that makes it sweet. It has balsamic notes, like it's a really depth of aroma and taste that we don't really recognize when it's put into our other things or you know, synthetics and things like that, it, we don't really recognize that.

But when you made your own vanilla extract, you will. Yes, you'll be able to start to tell.

**Dalia:** It smells so good. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. So what's your favorite thing to do with vanilla?

**Stephanie:** You know, my favorite thing, I have a lot of favorite things. So one of them is I, like, I have a body oil and I'm actually getting ready to launch my own product line.

So stay tuned, because I've been doing products for 20 years for other companies. So this is my, this is my little, you know, passion project. So body care, I love it. And I don't [00:12:00] think people realize nobody knows this, but vanilla is extremely antioxidant, so it's really good for the skin. Ooh. And it's basically got antioxidant.

Powerhouse, kind of like turmeric or something that we hear about. So I also sprinkle it on my food. So you can buy dried vanilla and you can put it into like barbecue sauces or sprinkle it on your rice, or you can put it over your oatmeal and it's amazing.

**Dalia:** Oh, I do sometimes put vanilla extract in my oatmeal. Where do I buy dried vanilla?

**Stephanie:** Well, it's gonna be on my website, so of course I got it from you. Yes.

Yeah. There's very few places to sell it, but I've become like this, like, oh my gosh, why does nobody know about this? It's like a, um, it's kind of, you know, I have it in my spice cabinet, kind of like, you know, turmeric or something.

You know, I just add it to my dishes, whether it's savory or or sweet. Yeah.

**Dalia:** What are some other things I should be doing? 'cause I just think of vanilla for sweet [00:13:00] dishes, baking, things like that.

**Stephanie:** Yes, yes. Oh, there's so much more you can do with it. Vanilla is amazing, of course. You know, in the baking side of things, I like to pair it with citrus.

You know, orange and vanilla is great. Almond and vanilla is great. All of that, those little blends are great, but I love to put it in savory dishes. So like lemon chicken with vanilla on it is great. Barbecue sauces with vanilla. Uh, what else do I do? Balsamic. I do a lot of salad dressings with some vanilla in it.

**Dalia:** Wow. Okay. Talk to me about some of the challenges of growing vanilla. You said, remind me, how long does it take?

**Stephanie:** So it [00:14:00] takes from a cutting, it's not gonna take that long, maybe two years from a cutting, but to produce beans, but from a tissue cultured little baby plant, it's gonna take four. Years, three, three to five years, basically, you produce a bean because they're, they're young plants.

So the ones that I'm selling, it's gonna take a couple of years for them to be productive plants. So that's one of the challenges and what I am kind of recommending to farmers is they introduce, you know, other crops that are faster growing. Like whether it's, you know, something else that they can make money on or.

Put them on existing crops like your mango trees or the citrus trees that are kind of defunct and not producing anymore. Vanilla can grow really well up those trees as a Tudor tree.

**Dalia:** I don't understand.

**Stephanie:** So, okay. I know, I, I get so excited I have to rewind a little bit.

**Dalia:** So talk, talk to me like I'm my 8-year-old son? Yes. How does this work?

**Stephanie:** [00:15:00] Okay, so vanilla is an orchid and naturally in the wild, an orchid hangs on a tree and grows up a tree and just hangs there and it gets nutrients from the leaves that kind of compost into the ground. So it needs ground roots, and then it'll grow all the way up the tree, you know, similar to, uh, like.

The way you would see a dragon fruit or something, you know it's gonna need a support system. Or in these large vanilla farms, they use shade houses. So you can either have them grow up a tree like they would in the wild, or you can have them grow on a shade hou inside a shade house with support systems.

Huh? And so they need that understory shade. Ideally they will get burned by the sun and die. So you need to have a lot of shade and they need some nice compost, well draining soil. And so they like, you know, either coconut qua [00:16:00] or peat moss or something like that where it's gonna be well draining. And like I said, they can be grown up Tudor trees, which is is beneficial for a farmer because then they'll have.



You know, a secondary crop while they're waiting for their vanillas to start producing.

Right. Because you said two years was not that long, but to me, two years is a long time, right? Yes. Yeah, exactly.

Yeah. Yeah, it is. It's a, it's a waiting game.

**Dalia:** Hmm.

**Stephanie:** Yeah.

**Dalia:** Shade House would be a great name for like a gossip podcast.

Oh, yeah. It, they're like shade rooms. So Shade house. Yes.

**Stephanie:** A Shade House. Yes.

**Dalia:** What are you gonna call your line?

**Stephanie:** So Sunshine State Vanilla. Those are the plants that I have and you know, I've been selling those to individual plants and large scale commercial trays of, of plants as well. And then once the beans are there, it'll be sunshine State, vanilla beans and yeah.

**Dalia:** Okay. So I might keep Shade House for my own. You should. Side project. You should. I don't know what it would be.

**Stephanie:** Yeah, no, I think that's a great idea.

**Dalia:** Oh my gosh. Okay. [00:17:00] What kind of price range are we talking for? A vanilla plant, because it's almost like a money tree.

**Stephanie:** It is. Well, and that's the thing, is vanilla.

There's complications to buying vanilla from, I'm gonna say unknown sources. You know, you can buy vanilla on Amazon, vanilla plants. You can buy them on Etsy, you can see them here and there. They range from \$20 to a hundred dollars. And the issue that you have with that is vanilla can carry a virus called mosaic virus, and you actually don't know that it has this virus until it just doesn't ever produce a bean.



So after the two. Three, four years. Yeah.

You wait and you wait and you wait. And it never produces a bean. So a lot of people get burned that way. And I've seen farms that have had to pull their entire crop out and I've helped them source, you know, my plants are all virus tested, and so they're all clean.

Stock, which is what you want.

**Dalia:** How do you test them?

**Stephanie:** There's kits that you test them, but the [00:18:00] greenhouse that I use, they test them regularly. And as long as there's no cross-contamination with other orchids, then you should be fine. You know? But a lot of times I would say, you know, orchid enthusiasts, there's a lot of those, and when they.

They carry and transmit these viruses and that can affect your vanilla production. And so that's one of the main challenges is making sure that you're getting clean stock for your plants. So that's something that I kind of pride myself in that we've done this tissue culture project is, is what is called, and it's all clean, you know, clean plants, and so they're healthy and they're good to.

You know, start a farm with or personal project, whatever you wanted to do with your plants. So individually, I think my plants individually are around \$40. Oh, that's it for, yeah, for a plant. And then you can buy the trays. The tray has about 72 plants in it. And so if [00:19:00] somebody wanted to start a larger scale production of vanilla, they would get a tray.

And there's discounts in those.

**Dalia:** Oh, I was expecting it to be more.

**Stephanie:** Yeah. Well you see, I've seen it on Amazon. I saw somebody trying to sell a plant for \$120 and I thought, wow, that's like a really special one. I don't know. But I wouldn't trust it because where did that plant come from? Right. It might have traveled from another country, show up dead.

It might have a virus in it. We don't know, you know? Right. So,

**Dalia:** so is this something, if I bought a plant for \$40 that I could realistically grow in my backyard? Yes. Or do you need a lot of. I mean, you have such a

depth of knowledge about this that it makes me think, I don't know, half the stuff she knows. I don't know if I could grow one of these.

**Stephanie:** Oh, they're easy. They're, I mean, basically if you can keep a grocery store orchid alive, you can keep vanilla alive.

**Dalia:** Well, so, so, so for me, okay, so,

**Stephanie:** so what it needs, it's happiest. Well, in Florida it's pretty easy to grow, but they are happiest in humid. Environment. [00:20:00] So you've got a nice human environment.

They like shade, they like well draining, you know, soils. So as long as you have those three things nailed down, you're gonna be fine.

**Dalia:** Okay.

**Stephanie:** I know people that are growing them in Michigan in a bathroom and they're producing Oh. So they, they are easy to grow if you know exactly what they like.

**Dalia:** Okay. Yeah. Do they smell like vanilla while they're growing?

**Stephanie:** No, they smell earthy. I know everybody asked me that. I'm like, and. And I've often wanted to see, you know, what's in the leaves, you know, chemically and whatever. But you know, as an orchid, you don't have much aroma from an orchid leaf. You know, it's same thing, but the blossom, the orchid itself, the flour of the vanilla is extremely aromatic.

**Dalia:** Yeah, yeah, that makes sense. Yeah. We'd certainly have the humidity here in Florida.

**Stephanie:** Yes,

for sure.

**Dalia:** So it's the perfect location for your Florida Vanilla Symposium. Yes. It sounds. Incredible. Yes. I just wanna like walk into that room and smell vanilla. Oh, it's

**Stephanie:** gonna be amazing. Tell me all about it. Yeah, so [00:21:00] I'm so excited.

Basically, you know, I kind of went down this road of wanting to grow vanilla and I. For my personal business. And then, you know, I opened it up to introducing it to other farmers. And then when everybody wanted to end, it kind of became this like, well, how do we grow it? And I have found that I've spent hours and hours and hours chatting with farmers on how to grow it, and now I have this nice.

Community of people that don't know each other. And I really want us all to get together as well as, you know, people that are interested in what we're doing. You know, come and learn about it. It it's open to everybody. And so yeah, we're gonna have, we've got I think, five speakers, myself, of course. Alan Chambers who headed up the, you know, he was the leader in the research in Florida at the university.

And then I have a, a gentleman that is one of the largest international [00:22:00] vanilla brokers that's coming to talk about, oh, all the different types of vanilla around the world. It sounds like a movie, like a vanilla heist or something. Yeah. I mean, vanilla is like that. Yeah. It's kind of cool. So, and then of course we're, we're, I'm nailing down a caterer and we're doing an a wonderful vanilla inspired meal, and I've been speaking with, there's a brewery in town that has a vanilla porter and a, and a chocolate, vanilla, some other types of homemade beers that he's doing that he wants to come and have samples for everybody. So it's gonna be a great event.

I'm so excited. And, and then on top of it, I'm hoping to launch my, uh, product line as well. Ooh, I know my vanilla product line. Fun. Yeah. Okay,

**Dalia:** so when and where is the symposium?

**Stephanie:** So April 12th is, and it's gonna be at my, one of my friend's farms. She's got a beautiful greenhouse location and she hosts lots of events.

It's amazing. It's called Fallen Oak Farm. Fallen Oaks Farm. And [00:23:00] she's got. Little baby goats and it's just a really beautiful, a aromatic Gardens. It's a really special place that she has there. So we're having it at her location fine. Inside the The Vanilla greenhouse.

**Dalia:** Okay, so

Fallen Oaks Farm in Valrico.

Yes. Valrico, which is a suburb of Tampa. Yes, exactly. That sounds super fun. Okay. I know you said you just got into this sort of. Because you were following your curiosity, right? A few years ago, but I wanna go back. When you were growing up, do you have any vanilla memories? I mean, that smell is so every time I bake, yeah.

My son and I love to bake together and he always wants to smell the vanilla and so do I.

**Stephanie:** Well, I think everybody, you know, I've been. I've been in the aromatherapy industry for a long time and everybody has this connection to vanilla, and it almost is, this brings you back to childhood or for me as a mom, like you, you know that, that vanilla ba, you know, smelling your baby's head.

It's just like very. In your brain, you, you have this [00:24:00] connection to this sweetness, and all of the baby products are always vanilla, you know? And so I, I feel like that's my connection is as a mom, you know, you have this connection of vanilla to my babies, you know?

**Dalia:** Yeah. Or when someone's burning a vanilla candle.

Oh yeah. It just takes you all kinds of places. It's peaceful. Yes.

**Stephanie:** It's one of the most calming aromas. People and I actually spoke to a guy that was doing research in France and, and he had babies in that he was doing a study on in the nicu and he said that if you diffused aroma in the nicu, those babies survived like twice as much as the babies that didn't get the ar Oh, the aroma.

Wow. Yeah, it was really powerful. Yeah. Wow. Amazing.

**Dalia:** Who knew?

**Stephanie:** Who knew. Knew

**Dalia:** all of this. You did.

**Stephanie:** Right, right. Well, you become like the vanilla nerd. You're like, what? Wait, it's growing in Florida. You know? I need to know more. I need to know it all, you know? Yeah. Well,

**Dalia:** thank you for sharing it all with us. [00:25:00] Is there anything else you want us to know about Sunshine State Vanilla, or the upcoming symposium?

**Stephanie:** No, I think it's a good opportunity for people that don't know anything about vanilla, to come and learn about it and to learn about the different types of way It's. It's utilized not just from the Bean, but from the powder, the extract, you know, uh, using it in food and then growing it. Of course, it's extremely easy in Florida, you know, a lot of times I've seen vanilla growing, you know, now because it's, when you're looking for a red car, all of a sudden you see a hundred red cars.

It's like that for vanilla. For me, I'll be walking down a neighborhood and I'll be like, oh, there's vanilla growing up in Oak Tree and. I wonder if they even know that that's what it is. You know, like it's everywhere. I see it. I see it a lot of places in South Florida, so it's very common. I would say it's common for those that are looking, but the symposium would be a good place for people to learn more,

**Dalia:** for sure.

Yeah. My friend Jovan, who's. The one who got me [00:26:00] making my own vanilla extract, I sent her a link to your website. Oh good. And she was, she said she was geeking out. Oh, good. Good, good, good. So I think it's one of those things we didn't even realize we were interested in. Yeah. Right. But now I just find it fascinating.

**Stephanie:** Yeah, it is.

**Dalia:** So thank you Stephanie, and thank you of course, Kenya Woodard for suggesting you as a guest.

**Stephanie:** Sure. For sure. It's great. Wow. Okay. I thank you Kenya.

**Dalia:** Go home and put vanilla on everything.

**Stephanie:** Yeah. You need some vanilla plants now? I do. You gotta start growing it.

**Dalia:** Thank you. This was so much fun. Fun.

**Stephanie:** Of course. Thank you. I enjoyed it.

Stephanie Webb is the founder and owner of Sunshine State Vanilla. She's hosting the inaugural Florida Vanilla Symposium, which takes place this Saturday, April 12th, 2025 at Fallen Oak Farms in Valrico. It's open to the public and you'll find a link in the show notes or on our website, the zest podcast.com.

Thanks to my girl Kenya Woodard, who always suggests great episodes for giving us this idea. And if you would like to suggest a Zest guest, [00:27:00] email us at [info@thezestpodcast.com](mailto:info@thezestpodcast.com). I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron. The Zest is a production of WUSF copyright 2025, part of the NPR network.