

# The real deal

## Jilli Vanilli's handcrafted vanilla extract is a hit

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"I wanted to make an infusion that is as pure as it can be," says Jilli Spear of her Jilli Vanilli line of vanilla extract.  
BRETT LEIGH DICKS/NEWS-PRESS  
PHOTOS



Ms. Spear also offers pure vanilla beans.



The 7-ounce jars of Jilli Vanilli pure vanilla sugar retail for \$24.



Jilli Spear sells her products at stores throughout the county, including Isabella

When you hear the name Jilli Vanilli, it's difficult not to recall the plight of a couple of funky Euro popsters whose career came to a screeching halt after a much-publicized lip-syncing scandal. But while the company's name might be a play on words, there's nothing imitation about Jilli Spear's vanilla extract company.

The hand-infused small-batch vanilla is made in Santa Barbara from a combination of local, organic and fair-trade ingredients.

"If you look at the label of most vanilla products, there's a whole list of ingredients," Ms. Spear said. "There are all sorts of things that shouldn't really be in there. If you have quality beans and alcohol, you don't need anything else. I wanted to make an infusion that is as pure as it can be, and that's why the only things that go into my vanilla are beans and alcohol."

She started commercially formulating her own vanilla about two and a half years ago. A friend who works with a nonprofit in Uganda gave her a sample of fair-trade organic vanilla beans while another introduced her to Cutler's Artisan Spirits in the Funk Zone.

Ms. Spear said the benefit of using vanilla beans from Uganda is that the East Africa nation has two distinct dry seasons, ensuring a fresh supply of beans year-round. She turned to Cutler's Artisan Spirits for her alcohol because its rigorous distillation process creates a clean and smooth product — perfect for vanilla extraction.

The sweet smell of success came after Ms. Spear moved to Santa Barbara three years ago from the East Coast, where she ran a real estate business with her mother in New Jersey. Ms. Spear would frequently escape the big city hustle and bustle to visit friends in the area.

"I loved everything about Santa Barbara," Ms. Spear, 44, told the News-Press on a recent day at Isabella Gourmet Foods, where her products line the shelves. "I loved the location and I loved the lifestyle. And I really loved how the culinary scene here revolved around the farmers markets. I'm a foodie and there are markets in New Jersey and New York, but nothing like what there is here."

After arriving in the summer of 2013, Ms. Spear volunteered for various nonprofit organizations. Her work with Food From the Heart and the Jewish Federation of Greater Santa Barbara helped her get to know local produce purveyors and food makers, and those interactions quickly inspired her to

contemplate starting a business of her own.

"I loved what was happening in Santa Barbara with cottage foods," said Ms. Spear, referring to a state law that was passed that allows certain non-perishable foods to be prepared in the home for sale to the public. "I did a jam-making course and thought about making jam. I also thought about making granola. Then one night I had an epiphany — why not make vanilla? By the morning, I had the whole idea mapped out."

"Southern California has so much wonderful food and so many incredible ingredients, but I realized that the one ingredient that was missing was vanilla," said Ms. Spear, who was already making it at home. "Organic vanilla is hard to find and pure flavorful vanilla is even harder."

She started handcrafting her own vanilla after a trip to Israel five years ago.

"I went to an open-air market with a friend and we bought vanilla beans," Ms. Spear recalled. "My friend showed me how to make vanilla, and after making it for the first time, I was so amazed and impressed by the process that ever since then I've been making my own vanilla."

She's now retailing her commercial line at several locations throughout the county. The 3.4-ounce bottles of pure vanilla extract cost \$30; she also offers 7-ounce jars of pure vanilla sugar for \$24 and 0.35-ounce packages of vanilla beans for \$18.

"People have looked at my vanilla and told me they don't bake," Ms. Spear said. "Baking is only a small part of what you can do with vanilla."

"You can put it on yogurt with fruit and granola or add it to a smoothie ... coffee and tea. I even have a friend who dabs it on her wrists and uses it for a scent."

One of the most popular uses so far has been in a cocktail Ms. Spear devised that won first place in the cocktail competition at last year's Santa Barbara Fermentation Festival and was featured recently at the Santa Barbara Food & Wine Weekend at Bacara Resort & Spa.

"It's called a Jilli Vanillitini," she said. "It uses vodka from Cutler's Artisan Spirits, local farmers market tangerine juice and my vanilla. I rim the glass with my vanilla sugar and it all makes a beautiful cocktail. It's been a real hit."

As for the name of her business, was the infamous musical duo Milli Vanilli

an influence?

"Definitely not because Jilli Vanilli is the real deal!" Ms. Spear said with a laugh.

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