

OFF THE
TOPIC

Balsamic Vinegar

By
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A collection of suspended glass amphoras containing olive oils and vinegars from all over the world. (Display at Oil and Vinegar, www.oilandvinegarusa.com)

Roughly 20 years ago Americans discovered balsamic vinegar. A friend from California recently complained bitterly that all vinegar in America is now balsamic; and furthermore, when she tells people that it is seldom used in Italy, no one believes her.

It's true. Balsamic vinegar goes back many centuries to around 1,000 B.C. It was prized as a perfect elixir and a cure for everything from sore throats to labor pains, not for its use in food. Today, some older Italians still like it as an after-dinner

digestivo in place of more potent liqueurs. Should you be so lucky to know someone who makes his own, you might be served a few drops in a thimble-sized glass, each drop to dissolve on the tongue and bathe the senses with deep and mysterious flavors. This kind of balsamic is likely to be at least 30 years old and is served straight from the barrel.

Italian restaurants are beginning to drizzle thick balsamic around the edges of plates for cheese and fruit desserts. At times it is used with wild strawberries in



Pre-packaged balsamic vinegar of Modena ranging from four to 30 years old (Display at Oil and Vinegar, www.oilandvinegarusa.com)

place of lemon juice and sugar. But as for cooking with it, no. Not yet, anyway. Italians have been quick to recognize the demand for balsamic in other countries but are slow to use it themselves. The current vogue for eating cheese, particularly *pecorino* made from sheep's milk, is not with balsamic vinegar but with assorted fruit chutneys.

Balsamic vinegar is not made from vinegar. It is made from whole grapes, usually Trebbiano and Lambrusco, which are boiled to a syrupy liquid in copper cauldrons. After it is well-cooked and thick, it goes into wooden barrels. Secret family recipes require it to be transferred to barrels of different woods, one after another. Each different wood adds nuances of flavor. Each barrel has a hole in the top to allow for evaporation and thus, thickening. Some is always left in the barrel to start the next batch. The acidic taste of young balsamic gives way to a sweeter, thicker and smoother product.

Today, good commercial balsamic is aged only in oak. Cheap balsamic goes into stainless steel containers and never sees the inside of a wooden barrel. Unlike wine, balsamic does not continue to age

once bottled.

Price is no guarantee of top quality, just as it is not always a guide to good wine. The standards for the DOC (*denominazione di origine controllata* translating to board of control) labels are high and to be trusted. For all that, there are many less expensive balsamic types of vinegar without the DOC label.

Then there are the cheap balsamics, so thin they can be used in spray bottles. They are fine for salads, although Italians stick to plain wine vinegar and precious little of it, preferring the flavor of olive oil to dominate the salad. These inexpensive balsamic vinegars are made quickly with caramelized sugar. They are not to be despised entirely, however, because they are good for marinades and for sweet-and-sour sauces.

Balsamic vinegar comes in both clear and dark bottles. Some of these bottles are treasures in themselves but may not necessarily reflect the quality of the contents. Prices may range from \$5 to \$500. Let common sense be your guide; splash around the inexpensive stuff in cooking but treasure every drop of the expensive varieties.

My trusted deli owner in Tuscany recommended one called Acetaia la Bonissima at a cost of about \$32. He says it is possible to pay three times that much and not find anything better. It is thick, sweet and full of depth. The other in my kitchen is Ortalli in a spray bottle, which my husband likes in salads because he has a sweet tooth. It costs about \$10 and contains a colorant but no added sugar and claims to be aged in oak. We do not use balsamic vinegar at all when we have Italian guests to dinner.

When buying balsamic vinegar, read the contents on the label. Most will say *aceto balsamico di Modena*, balsamic vinegar of Modena. Modena is where most balsamic vinegar is made. If the word *caramello* appears, it is a quick balsamic and should be inexpensive but not very good. If the label gives the age, it won't be less than 12 years and will be expensive. This does not mean that balsamics aged less than 12 years are unacceptable.

I asked my deli owner about white balsamic, which is beginning to appear in American recipes. He said there is no such thing. It is white wine vinegar with added white sugar syrup and not aged so much as 10 minutes. It was invented because cooks did not like to discolor fish and chicken dishes.

So, an ancient elixir has become a modern cooking ingredient, chic but not so treasured in Italy as in days of yore.

For products available at Oil and Vinegar see www.oilandvinegarusa.com

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