

Balsamic Vinegar (Aceto Balsamico)



Bella Vita

MEDITERRANEAN TASTE



General Overview

Balsamic vinegar is a traditional-flavor vinegar commonly used in Italian cuisine. It is also used as a salad dressing when combined with oil. Unlike common vinegars, it is dark and thick with a complex, sweet taste and is much more expensive. In its long-aged forms (at least 10 and even up to 25 years) it is often taken straight or served over strawberries or ice cream, while the more mass-market vinegar (usually aged 3 years or less) is used in salad dressings and marinades.

It is produced from the concentrated juice ("must") of white grapes (typically trebbiano grapes) that has been boiled down to approximately 50% of its original volume, and fermenting that into alcohol. This is then once again fermented to balsamic vinegar, with a slow aging process that concentrates the flavors. The flavor is intensified over decades, with the vinegar being kept in the fine wooden casks, becoming sweet, viscous and very labor intensive to produce; while it ages and gradually evaporates, the liquid is transferred to successively smaller casks made of different woods, absorbing the flavor characteristics of each wood and becoming more concentrated with each transfer. Oak, mulberry, chestnut, cherry, juniper, and ash are the most commonly used woods. Some older balsamic vinegar is added to the "must" to create a core complex and intricate taste, and to add acidity.



History and Background

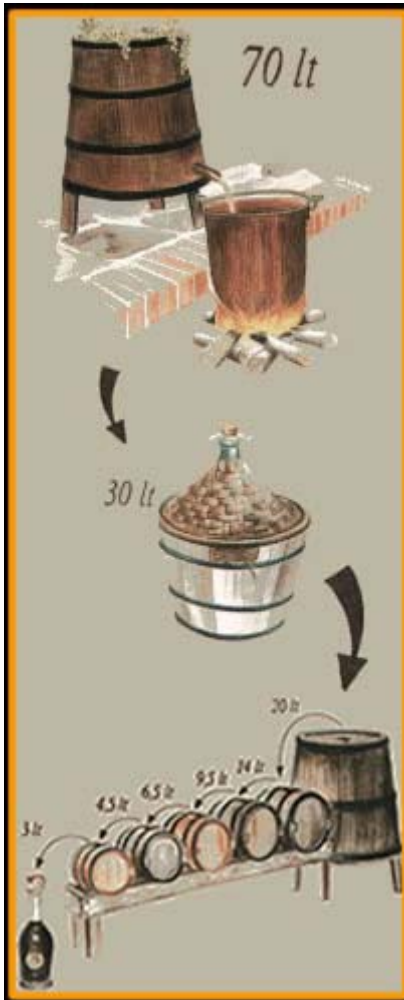
It is a traditional product originating in Modena, where it has been made since the Middle Ages and the Italian government protects the name. Nobody knows for sure how and when balsamic vinegar was created. A small quantity of cooked grape "must" (the "saba", widely used in Modena cuisine in the past) was possibly forgotten and rediscovered a long time after. Having undergone a process of natural acetification, it was found to have a sweet and sour taste.

The first written documents date back to the 11th century when a chronicle of the Benedictine Monk Donizone mentions the gift of a small barrel of vinegar in the year 1046, on the part of Marquis Bonifacio, the Lord of the castle of Canossa and Matilde's father, to the King and future Franconian Emperor Henry II.

The development of balsamic vinegar took effect from 1598 when the Este Dukes moved from Ferrara to Modena, which then became the capitol of Duchy. Documents attesting to the particular attention shown by the court towards this product date to this period and describing how it was employed for everyday general use and as gifts to esteemed persons. Commencing in 1700 balsamic vinegars was already well known in Europe.

Disclaimer: The information provided is thought as general information about the produce. Average counting, weights and dimensions may vary throughout the harvesting season and the production areas.

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Balsamic vinegar, before being used for gastronomic purposes, was used for its medical qualities. In the treaty "Of the government of plaque and the means to be cured of it" Ludovico Antonio Muratori, an esteemed Modena academic, describes a number of vinegar-based recipes considered as useful antidotes against the terrible disease.

Today ""Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena"

This balsamic vinegar is obtained from grape "musts" originating from autochonus vines cultivated in the province of Modena, in the area situated between the River Secchia Valley and the left-hand bank of the River Reno. It's forbidden to use "musts" with the addition of any additive or other substance. The "must" has to be cooked on a direct fire in an open batch. The concentrate obtained then undergoes a gently alcoholic and acetic fermentation without the addition of other substances with the exception of the possible grafting with bacterial colonies know by the name of "Madre". Acetification then takes place in barrels of different wooden essences arranged in "batteries" of 5/6 barrels.

After a number of years of maturation, the operation known as "rincalzo" (reinforcement) is employed during the end of the cold season. A small quantity of mature vinegar is extracted from the smallest barrel, which is replaced, by an extract from the former barrel in the "batteries". This process continues until the largest barrel is reinforced by cooked "must" of the year in progress. The product is usually situated in the attic in order to maintain the proper temperature range, warm in the summer and cold in the winter, which favors the ageing of the product.

Balsamic Vinegar of the highest quality, labeled "Tadizionale", usually sells for very high prices. A small (100ml) bottle can cost between US \$100 and \$400. Most producers, however, do not employ all six of the aforementioned woods in the ageing process. Some use only oak.

Several mass-produced, less expensive varieties may not be aged in wood at all, being nothing more than ordinary wine vinegar with coloring and added sugar. Legally and per the rules of the consortium, these are not allowed to be called "Traditional".

Balsamic vinegars are very highly appreciated and valued by chefs and gourmet food lovers. Balsamic vinegar was almost unknown outside of Italy until the 1980s. The Italian food writer Marcella Hazan has been credit with popularizing it in North America and Britain.

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Health Benefits

Vinegar is an old time home remedy that really delivers relief when you need it. It is a weak acid and has been used as a medicine/antiseptic for thousands of years. In the year 400 B.C., Hippocrates, the father of medicine, used vinegar to treat his patients. This naturally occurring germ killer was one of the very first medicines.

Balsamic vinegar contains more than thirty important nutrients, a dozen minerals, over half a dozen vitamins and essential amino acids, and several enzymes. Plus, it has a large dose of pectin for a healthy heart.

Recipes:

Black Risotto Seasoned with Balsamic Vinegar

14 ounces of Arborio rice
1/4 cup butter
1 onion, chopped
2 tablespoons of aged balsamic vinegar
10 ounces of radicchio, finely cut
4 cups of meat broth

Brown half the onion with about two ounces of butter in a pan. Add the rice and let it toast lightly, stirring continuously. Add the broth, a little at a time, stirring now and then. In a separate pan, brown the radicchio in about two ounces of butter with the other half of the onion. When the rice is half-way done, add the radicchio to it. When the rice is fully cooked, add the balsamic vinegar and whisk the remaining butter into the dish. Serve immediately.

Mushrooms "Trifolati Style" with Balsamic Vinegar

About 21-24 ounces of fresh boletus mushrooms
2 tbs. olive oil a handful of parsley, chopped
2 cloves garlic, sliced
1 tbs. balsamic vinegar

Wash the mushrooms and cut them up, keeping the stalks and heads separate. The stalks should be cut very thin and the heads into substantial pieces. Fry the parsley and garlic in olive oil. (At the end of the browning process, the garlic can be removed for a milder flavor). Add the stalks and fry for a few minutes, then add the heads. The mushrooms should cook for about 20 minutes altogether. Just before serving, add salt to taste and the balsamic vinegar, and mix well.

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