

BALSAMIC VINEGAR



Three desserts in Modena with balsamic vinegar: clockwise from left, panna cotta, zabaglione, and crème caramel.

Balsamic vinegar (Italian: *aceto balsamico*) is a traditional flavoured vinegar commonly used in Italian cuisine. It is also often used as a salad dressing when combined with oil. It is a traditional product originating in Modena, where it has been made since the Middle Ages and some of the names (notably: "Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena") are protected by the Denominazione di Origine Controllata and the European Union's Protected designation of origin. Unlike common vinegars, it is dark and thick with a complex but sweet taste, well aged, and much more expensive.

Balsamic vinegar is highly appreciated and valued by chefs and gourmet food lovers. The Italian food writer Marcella Hazan has been credited with popularising

it in Britain and North America (where it was largely unknown until the 1980s).

Classifications of balsamic vinegar

Only two consortia produce true balsamic vinegar, Modena and Reggio Emilia. Modena (Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena) designates the different ages of their balsamic vinegar by label colour. A red label means the vinegar has been aged for at least 12 years, a silver label that the vinegar has aged for at least 18 years and a gold label that designates the vinegar has aged for 25 years or more.

Reggio Emilia (Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale de Reggio Emilia) uses a similar system to indicate the age of their balsamic vinegars. A white label means the vinegar has aged for at least 12 years and a gold label bearing the designation *extravecchio* to show the vinegar has aged for 25 years or more

Condimento balsamic vinegars are made in the same method as the tradizionale vinegars, but are distributed by producers who are either located outside of the Modena or Reggio provinces of Italy or do not have consortium approval. Some producers of tradizionale balsamic vinegars also produce condimento grade vinegars. Condimento balsamic vinegars may be labeled as *condimento balsamico*, *salsa balsamica* or *salsa di mosto cotto*. However, there are no official standards or labeling systems to designate condimento balsamic vinegars

Uses

Commercial grade balsamic vinegar can be used in salad dressings, marinades and sauces. Cooks use tradizionale and condimento vinegars in small amounts in simple dishes where the balsamic vinegar's complex tastes can be noted. Young vinegars (3 – 5 years) are used in salad dressing while mid-aged balsamic vinegars (6 – 12 years) are used to enhance sauces, pastas and risottos. Old vinegars (12 years plus), which are very rich and thick, are used sparsely to enhance plain meat or fish, fresh fruit such as strawberries or even drunk from a small glass to conclude a meal. It is also used as a topping on vanilla ice cream.

Manufacture



Balsamic vinegar is manufactured from the juice of white grapes (typically, trebbiano grapes) boiled down to approximately 50% of its original volume to create a concentrated must, which is then fermented with a slow aging process which concentrates the flavours. The flavour intensifies over decades, with the vinegar being kept in fine wooden casks, becoming sweet, viscous and very concentrated. During this period, a proportion evaporates: it is said that this is the "the angels' share," a term also used in the production of scotch whisky, wine, and other alcoholic beverages).

The finest and most traditional balsamic vinegar is very labour-intensive to produce; while it ages and gradually evaporates, the liquid is transferred to successively smaller casks made of different woods, absorbing the flavour characteristics of each wood and becoming more concentrated with each transfer. Oak, mulberry, chestnut, cherry,

juniper, ash, and acacia are the most commonly used woods. Some older balsamic vinegar is added to the must to create a more complex and intricate taste, and to enhance acidity. At the end of the process, the vinegar is taken from the smallest cask: each cask is filled with the contents of the preceding (larger) cask and the cooked must is added to the largest cask.

Balsamic vinegar of the highest quality, labeled *tradizionale*, usually sells for very high prices; a small (100 ml) bottle can cost between US \$100 and \$400. Most producers, however, do not employ all seven of the aforementioned woods in the aging process; some employ 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, according to the rules of the Consortium, these are not allowed to be called "traditional". However, since the wording "Aceto Balsamico di Modena" failed to achieve the PDO status ("Protected Denomination of Origin" or "Denominazione di Origine Protetta"), products marketed by that name may not have even been produced in Modena. Only the products named "Aceto balsamico tradizionale di Modena" and "Aceto balsamico tradizionale di Reggio Emilia" are protected by the European PDO (Protected designation of origin) label.