balsamic VINEGAR

Let this flavor genie out of the bottle—and into your cooking

Barely two decades ago, balsamic vinegar sped into American kitchens faster than a Ferrari on an autostrada, becoming the first choice in vinaigrettes and displacing red wine vinegar in just about every other recipe. Fittingly, Modena, the same Italian region that gave birth to the Ferrari is also the birthplace of balsamic vinegar, first referenced in an 11th-century letter from the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

There are really two types of balsamic vinegar: the sweet but sharply acidic variety that you find at the supermarket, and aceto balsamico tradizionale, the slowly aged traditional balsamic vinegar from either Modena or Reggio-Emelia that's so deliciously unique that the European Union gave it PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) status to guarantee its authenticity.

"The only true balsamic vinegars are the tradizionales which come in two basic grades," explains Peter de Garmo, owner of Pastaworks in Portland, OR, and member of the Slow Food USA board of directors. "Everything else is clever marketing."

Making tradizionale balsamic is a 12- to 25-year task that begins in hillside vineyards where sweet white grapes are grown specifically for the vinegar. Once harvested, the grapes are pressed and the juice is cooked down to a syrup that is one third of its original volume. (It takes about 26 gallons of crushed grapes to make a gallon of balsamic vinegar). A “mother” liquid culled from previous productions is

5 to try

Peter de Garmo recommends these balsamic vinegar brands that can be found nationwide. "Always taste before you buy," he advises. "A good gourmet store will have open bottles for you to try the different vinegars."

1. Monari Federzoni Balsamic Vinegar of Modena; $4/16 oz. "Your basic, rudimentary everyday balsamic."


4. Cavalli Balsamic Condimento; $41/500ml. (about 16.9 oz.) "Aromatic, concentrated and mellow—best used as a condiment."

5. Acetaia San Giacomo Red Label; $120/3.38 oz. "Intense; aged 12 years and perfect when drizzled on Parmigiano-Reggiano."
added to the syrup (the same way bakers add a sourdough starter to bread) to begin the fermentation process. Over the years, the syrup is aged in wood barrels stored in attics where fluctuating temperatures encourage fermentation and evaporation. By the time it's bottled, tradizionale balsamic vinegar is so thick that a bead of it can hang from a fingertip like a dewdrop on a leaf. It's also pricey: Four ounces can cost $100 or more. But tradizionale balsamic isn't the kind of vinegar you splash in a stew or add to a salad dressing cruets. "Cooking with tradizionale balsamic is just evaporating your dollars away," says de Garmo. Instead, it should be drizzled over cheese, fresh fruit and ice cream, or used to finish risottos and delicately flavored main dishes.

There is a way to get that rich, sour-sweet "balsamic" taste without blowing your budget, though. Younger vinegars (aged less than 12 years) labeled condimento, not tradizionale, are made according to traditional methods and range from $30 to $50 per bottle.

More moderately priced balsamics—$10 to $20 for about 9 ounces—are one-part aged balsamic vinegar and five parts wine vinegar. Just be sure to read the fine print: About two-thirds of the bottles labeled balsamic vinegar on American supermarket shelves are imposters made with prunes, figs, brown sugar, white vinegar, artificial colors and flavorings. But even these have their use in vinaigrettes and syrupy reductions, like the one created for the sandwich recipe, p. 65.

Still, grocery-store and tradizionale balsamics have about as much in common as a Ford has with a Ferrari. Whether you choose the everyday workhorse or the "rare, rare treat," as de Garmo refers to tradizionale balsamic vinegar, both are well worth a test drive in your kitchen.

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OPEN-FACED SANDWICHES
WITH ROASTED PEPPER RELISH,
RICOTTA AND BALSAMIC SYRUP

Serves 4

Slowly reducing everyday balsamic vinegar is a standard chef’s trick for focusing its flavor and approximating the syrupy texture of a more expensive type. Recipe by Fiona Kennedy.

Balsamic Syrup
2 cups balsamic vinegar
½ cup pomegranate molasses
8 peppercorns
6 sprigs fresh thyme

Sandwich and Relish
3 Tbs. golden raisins
4 slices country bread
3 Tbs. olive oil, divided
2 cloves garlic, divided
1 cup roasted red peppers, diced
¼ cup toasted pine nuts
1 Tbs. chopped fresh mint
½ cup fresh ricotta cheese

1. To make Balsamic Syrup: Combine vinegar, molasses, peppercorns and thyme in saucepan over medium heat. Simmer 35 to 40 minutes over medium-low heat, or until reduced to a syrupy consistency. Strain into bowl, and set aside to cool.

2. To make Sandwich and Relish: Place raisins in small bowl; cover with hot water and let stand 10 minutes. Drain and chop; set aside.

3. Preheat oven to 350F. Brush bread slices with 2 Tbs. olive oil and place on baking sheet. Bake 10 minutes or until golden and crisp, but not hard. Rub 1 clove garlic on bread.

4. Mince remaining clove garlic and combine with peppers, pine nuts, raisins, mint, 1 Tbs. olive oil and 1 Tbs. Balsamic Syrup in small bowl. Season with salt and pepper.

5. Spread 2 Tbs. ricotta on each bread slice. Top with 2 Tbs. pepper relish, and drizzle with ½ to 1 tsp. Balsamic Syrup.

PER SERVING: 465 CAL; 10G PROT; 22G TOTAL FAT (5G SAT. FAT); 51G CARB; 18MG CHOL; 914MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 20G SUGARS