

BALSAMIC VINEGAR

Thirty years ago, no one outside of a small part of northern Italy had ever heard of balsamic vinegar, let alone tasted any. Now it's everywhere. Balsamic vinegar is now the single best selling vinegar in America, accounting for 45% of all supermarket vinegar sales. You can even find it on the salad bar at fast food joints. Well, just what is balsamic vinegar and what's all the fuss about?

It seems that there are two different kinds of balsamic vinegar, and they're made entirely differently. The original balsamic vinegar is a centuries-old tradition that comes from only two provinces of the Emilia-Romagna region of northern Italy, right near Tuscany. It starts with late harvest grapes, which are crushed and the sweet raisin-flavored juice, together with the skins and seeds, are boiled down to about half.

Then the liquid is placed in the largest of a series of wooden barrels. The barrels are made of a variety of woods, including oak, cherry, juniper and mulberry. The barrels aren't sealed shut, but have a cloth-covered opening on top to allow for evaporation. The barrels are stored in uninsulated attics, which in that part of Italy are hot in the summer and cold in the winter.

Every year, before new grape juice concentrate is added, some of the contents of the barrel are poured into a smaller one. This goes on for 12 years before a couple of quarts are poured out of the smallest barrel and the vinegar is deemed ready to use. Making traditional balsamic vinegar is so labor intensive that the stuff is incredibly expensive and used to be part of a woman's dowry. Nowadays traditional balsamic vinegar sells for about \$200 for a 3-ounce bottle, which breaks down to more than \$60 an ounce—more than many fine perfumes! This vinegar you do not put in a salad dressing. If you're lucky enough to try some, drizzle a few drops over some berries or over a piece of grilled fish, chicken or steak.

Then there's the other balsamic vinegar, which is made commercially and which takes just a few hours to make. There are no rules on this one, and manufacturers can, and do, color and sweeten ordinary wine vinegar and call it "balsamic" vinegar. This is the stuff you'll usually find in the supermarket.

But the surprise is how good the commercial balsamic vinegar turns out to be. *Cooks Illustrated* magazine did a taste comparison, (they have a bigger budget than we do here at the Hometown Kitchen), and came up with some surprising results. They found that in a vinaigrette salad dressing, the expensive stuff didn't justify its high price compared to the cheap stuff. And in a pan sauce, most of the fine aroma and depth of flavor of the traditional vinegar cooked away.

The good supermarket balsamic vinegars are both sweet and thick, like the real stuff, and also have a fairly high acid content to balance out the sweetness. In fact, one of the highest scoring supermarket balsamic vinegars is available for less than \$5 a bottle in Safeway. That's Monari Federzoni Balsamic Vinegar of Modena.

I like to use it for salad dressings, ranging from just a mixture of a little balsamic vinegar with some extra virgin olive oil to a more elaborate vinaigrette made with a dollop of Dijon mustard and some herbs. Most American salad dressings use too much vinegar for my taste. I like no more than a 1 to 4 ratio, vinegar to oil, and with balsamic vinegar will often make it a 1 to 6 ratio; that is 1 teaspoon of balsamic vinegar to 6 teaspoons, (or 2 tablespoons), of extra virgin olive oil. That's enough to dress a green salad for 2. Americans also tend to drown their salads with dressing—if a little dressing is good, more is not necessarily better. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.