

## FEATURED INGREDIENT: BALSAMIC VINEGAR

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KITCHEN

You could say that I am a balsamic vinegar fanatic. Although it may not be the certified “true” balsamic of Modena, Italy, I take great pride in finding high-quality, flavorful balsamic vinegar at specialty food shops in my area and during my travels. My pantry houses a wide variety of classic and fruit-infused balsamic vinegars and I use them in many recipes - from beverages to side dishes to entrees and desserts. For me, selecting balsamic vinegar is a similar exercise to tasting and selecting wine.



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What is the attraction? It's the complexity and depth of flavor, the sweet with the slight bit of tang that takes a dish from “good” to “wow”. It's like having a secret ingredient that enhances, rounds out and elevates the flavor profile of a dish in a way that other ingredients just do not. The health factor doesn't hurt either!

Now, true balsamic vinegar, known as “**Traditional**” (*Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena or di Reggio Emilia*) is the *capolavoro*, or masterpiece. This is the elegant, thick, sweet and fruity, deeply flavored balsamic that makes your heart swoon, the type to use as a condiment, a small drop here and there to “finish” a dish similar to accessorizing clothing with a distinct piece of jewelry. Traditionally produced in very small batches in family attics for personal use and gift giving, true balsamic vinegar is still produced in artisan fashion today in the Modena and Reggio Emilia areas of Italy. The process is highly prized, adhered to and strictly monitored by the Consortium for Production of Certified Balsamic Vinegar, an association formed by the family artisan producers to protect the craft. Along with a unique logo and seal, this balsamic vinegar is bottled in a specially designed Murano glass vessel. The creator commissioned by the Consortium, none other than the highly regarded Italian designer, Giorgetto Giuriaro - <http://www.italdesign.it/project/aceto-balsamico/>.

Custom has it that the grapes used for making certified balsamic vinegar are picked as late in the season as possible to maximize sugar content. Gently pressed and cooked into a highly concentrated “must”, the syrup is then aged for at least 12 years, and oftentimes more, in at least 3 casks of decreasing size (cherry, mulberry, juniper, oak, ash or chestnut only, *per favore*).

In addition, artisan members must follow all of these rules to meet the Consortium standards for creating true balsamic vinegar:

- The entire process must take place in the Modena or Reggio Emilia region of Italy with grapes grown, picked, cooked, aged and bottled there.
- The grape must can only be made from the juice of any of these five grape varieties - Trebbiano, Lambrusco, Berzemino, Occhio di Gatto and Spergola.
- No flavorings, preservatives or caramel color may be added to the grape must.
- When ready to sell their product, producers must submit their entire lot to the Consortium panel of experts for blind tasting. The Consortium evaluates and scores each balsamic vinegar for acidity, aroma, color, clarity, density, finesse, flavor, harmony and intensity.

A minimum passing score of 229 out of 400 points must be achieved for a 12-year balsamic and 255 or higher for a 25-year balsamic. Those that pass are bottled and sealed by the Consortium; those that do not pass are returned for further aging.

These pure balsamic vinegars proudly wear a DOP designation on the bottle and usually carry a hefty price tag.

The next level of balsamic vinegar, also made in the region and monitored by the Consortium, is classified with an IGP designation. These balsamic vinegars have wine vinegar added to a highly concentrated grape must and may be aged less time. Even so, they remain high quality vinegars, presenting a thick texture and sweet flavor profile, and generally fall into a slightly lower price range when compared to their DOP class relatives.

### **What about other artisan and commercially produced balsamic made in other areas of Italy or elsewhere?**

It may prove difficult to purchase a true, certified balsamic due to cost and other constraints. Good quality, more affordable artisan and commercially produced balsamic is available, and although these products cannot be categorized as “true” balsamic since they are not produced according to Consortium requirements, they can provide great culinary enjoyment. Just as with Champagne vs. sparkling wine, these vinegars have a place in our culinary endeavors, they are simply a different category of product from certified balsamic.

### **Health Benefits**

Balsamic vinegar provides some wonderful health benefits. Since it is a fermented food, it assists the digestive system and aids absorption of important vitamins and minerals. It also helps break down carbohydrates, slowing the absorption of sugar into the bloodstream which is a consideration for those with Type 2 diabetes or anyone concerned about carbohydrates. It's a great ingredient to use to lower sodium, unhealthy fats or added sugar in cooking and it adds variety to plain fruit and vegetables which may make them more enticing.

For further information on the health benefits of balsamic vinegar, see -

- [Balsamic Vinegar Nutrition Facts](#) by Gourmet Living
- [What are the Health Benefits of Balsamic Vinegar?](#) by Medical News Today

### **FUN FACT**

*Of course*, there is a balsamic vinegar museum! If traveling in Modena, Italy, pay a visit to the [Traditional Balsamic Vinegar Museum and Municipal Vinegar Factory](#) for a tour and a tasting.

### **SELECT**

If looking for the ultimate - a traditional, certified balsamic - look for

- Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena or Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Reggio Emilia and
- DOP (for Tradizionale) or IGP on the label
- Some may be numbered and sealed with a “Seal of Guarantee”

For further information on finding authentic balsamic vinegar, see -

- [How to Recognize the Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena DOP](#)
- [How to Recognize an Authentic and Good Balsamic Vinegar of Modena IGP](#)
- [Everything You Need to Know About Balsamic Vinegar](#) by Serious Eats

When searching for a **high-quality artisan or commercially produced balsamic** outside of those formally approved, it comes down to assessing how it is made, how it tastes and how it will be used. Talk with specialty food retailers about where they source their balsamic, the process used to make it, and check the ingredient list. Also, many specialty retailers offer tastings so consumers can sample before purchasing. Consider how you will use the vinegar - a more expensive, thick, rich vinegar showcases best when used as a “finishing” ingredient (think little or no cooking), while one that is aged a bit less time and is slightly more acidic can work well in cooking such as in marinades, braising liquid, soups or stews.

- The best non-certified balsamic is made similarly to that produced in Modena, Italy - a “must” is created with grapes procured from anywhere, the syrup is aged for several years and it contains no additives or preservatives. Some of these vinegars may be fruit- or herb-infused, which expands flavor options and still provides a high-quality product.
- The next level of commercially produced balsamic vinegar follows that initial process but adds wine vinegar, caramelized sugar and/or caramelized color before or during aging. If “must” is the first ingredient it will generally be a better product, but I recommend avoiding those that contain caramelized sugar or color.
- Much of the balsamic vinegar commonly found in grocery stores tends to fall into the lowest level of quality. These are produced in that same commercial fashion as the mid-level vinegars above but may not be aged at all or are only aged for a short period of time such as 60 days. You will know them when you taste them - they are puckeringly tart and have no real complexity or depth of flavor. I generally do not recommend these types of balsamic vinegar as they oftentimes contain added ingredients outside of grape must and red wine vinegar, and are too strongly acidic to please the palette.

#### **What I use and recommend:**

Check out oil and vinegar shops and other specialty food retailers in your area or consider those that ship nationwide. There are high-quality products sold at these types of retailers that are thick, complex and sweet, and work wonderfully in vinaigrettes, marinades, cooking and for drizzling or “finishing”.

Some retailers with products I enjoy are:

- [The Olive Grove](#) (Independent shop owner in Mendota Heights, MN)
- [Navidi's](#) (Independent shop owner in Camas, WA)
- [The Culinarium](#) (Independent shop owner in Jacksonville, OR)
- [Vom Fass](#) (based in Germany; franchises across USA)

For a less expensive, respectable, good quality vinegar for use in marinades and cooking, I use [Costco Kirkland Aged Balsamic Vinegar of Modena](#). It is made with grape must and red wine vinegar with no additives or preservatives. The texture is slightly thinner, less sweet and more acidic so I do not use this vinegar for “finishing” dishes.

For information on balsamic vinegar brand ratings, check out these resources -

- [The Best Balsamic Vinegars You Can Buy at the Grocery Store](#) by Bon Appetit
- [Supermarket Balsamic Vinegar](#) by Cooks Illustrated
- [Best Balsamic Vinegar Brands](#) by New York Mag
- [High-End Balsamic Vinegar](#) by Cooks Illustrated

#### **STORE**

It is best to store balsamic vinegar in a tightly sealed, dark glass bottle in a pantry or other cooler, dark place. Balsamic vinegar will provide the best flavor if used within 1 year.

## **USE**

Balsamic vinegar is surprisingly versatile and can be used in almost any application -

- vinaigrettes and salad dressings
- marinades
- sauces
- drizzled over fresh fruit, cheese, cooked vegetables, meat, fish or poultry, eggs, side dishes, ice cream and other desserts
- in soups, stews, chilis, baked goods
- added to beverages or sipped as a digestive
- when using as a “finishing” ingredient, use it sparingly, a little goes a long way
- for use in cooking and baking, generally 1 - 2 tablespoons are plenty to add depth of flavor

**Want to make your meals healthier by using balsamic vinegar? Give these 5 ideas try -**

- Enjoy a Spritzer rather than a sweet soda - add 1 teaspoon to 1 tablespoon of fruit-infused balsamic to sparkling water over ice, stir and enjoy!
- Replace fried fish and chips with marinated baked fish (use traditional-style balsamic vinegar, olive oil, herbs), and roasted potatoes (toss lightly with traditional-style balsamic vinegar and olive oil, season with salt and pepper).
- When making soup or a dish that contains beans, add a tablespoon of balsamic vinegar near the end of cooking to perk up the flavor and decrease the amount of salt needed to season the dish.
- Use balsamic vinegar in braising liquid for tenderizing less-fatty cuts of meat.
- Drizzle traditional-style or fruit-infused balsamic vinegar over cooked veggies or fresh fruit.