

Balsamic Vinegar

Unless you grew up in Italy, or in the midst of a very Italian family, you probably only learned about balsamic vinegar during the last decade or so. When I was growing up, there were basically three types of vinegar that most people knew of— white, red wine, and apple cider vinegar. Now the word "balsamic" is practically synonymous with vinegar. Even most fast food establishments now offer balsamic vinaigrette with their salads.

Authentic balsamic vinegar originated in the Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, specifically in the town of Modena. Surprisingly, dark balsamic vinegar is made from white Trebbiano grapes. True balsamic vinegar is designated by the words “aceto balsamico tradizionale,” and is usually aged for 10 years, and up to 75 years or more. Some balsamic vinegar is even aged 100 years, and is handed down from one generation to another as designated by the makers’ will.

The noteworthy dark color of the vinegar comes from the aging process, which is done in barrels. The juice is transferred from barrel to barrel as the aging process continues. The barrels are each made from a different type of wood, each imparting different flavors to the resulting vinegar. As the vinegar ages, its flavor mellows and becomes sweeter. The most expensive balsamic vinegar has been aged for long periods of time, is intensely flavored, and syrupy. This premium vinegar should be reserved for use as a garnish—a last minute drizzle over a piece of grilled meat, or some fresh berries. Younger balsamic vinegar, which is what most of us are accustomed to, is terrific for salad dressings, sauces, and marinades.

Because of balsamic vinegar’s popularity, many companies have come out with affordable imitations. Most commercial balsamic vinegars are made from red wine vinegar, grape juice, and often, caramelized sugar. Some are better than others, and several are downright terrible. Let your taste buds, and your pocketbook guide you. Many gourmet specialty stores will allow you to taste various vinegars, before deciding on purchase.

At our home, salad is on the dinner menu at least 3 or 4 times a week--more than that during the spring and summer months. We have sampled dozens of store bought balsamic vinaigrette, but most are either too sweet or too oily tasting. Our very favorite is this simple home-made version. I keep a copy of the recipe on my bulletin board at all times, and even my kids can whip it up in just a few minutes. If you do not have any shallots or fresh herbs, just use the vinegar, olive oil and Dijon—it still tastes terrific.

Basic BALSAMIC VINAIGRETTE

One-fourth cup balsamic vinegar
Two-thirds cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon shallot, minced (optional)
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

2 tablespoons fresh herbs, minced (optional)
Small pinch sugar (to taste)
salt and pepper (to taste)

In small glass bowl, whisk together all ingredients. Refrigerate for up to a week. Bring to room temperature before tossing with salad greens.

Balsamic Chicken

2 tablespoons olive oil
1/4 cup finely chopped onion
1 tablespoon garlic
1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, sliced into 1/2-inch strips
1/4 cup balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
3 tablespoons pine nuts
Salt and pepper
Mixed greens
Fresh grated Parmesan cheese

Heat oil in large non-stick skillet and cook onion until tender. Stir in garlic and chicken. Cook chicken until golden brown. Stir in the balsamic vinegar and let simmer for 1 minutes. Stir in honey and Dijon and toss to coat. Add pine nuts and season with salt and pepper. Top mixed greens with chicken mixture and fresh grated Parmesan.

Balsamic Grilled Vegetables

2 medium yellow squash, sliced
1 medium zucchini, sliced
1 medium eggplant, sliced into 1/2-inch thick circles
1 red onion, sliced in 1/2-inch thick circles
2 Roma tomatoes, sliced in 1/2 lengthwise
1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and quartered
1 yellow bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and quartered
2 portobello mushroom caps, sliced into thick slices
3 green onions
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper
1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1/2 cup balsamic vinegar

Preheat grill to high.

Prepare all vegetables. Place vegetables in a roasting pan with the mushroom caps and green onions. Season vegetables generously with salt and pepper, and toss with the olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Place vegetables, cut side down, on the hot grill and cook for a couple minutes on each side, or until tender and nicely marked by the grill.

Remove from grill and toss with an additional 1/4 cup balsamic vinegar. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Broiled Asparagus with Reduced Balsamic Glaze

2 pounds asparagus spears, trimmed and sliced on the bias

2 tablespoons olive oil

Salt and pepper

¾ cup balsamic vinegar

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

½ cup shaved Parmesan cheese

Toss asparagus with 2 T. olive oil, and sprinkle with salt and pepper, and set aside. In small saucepan, boil balsamic vinegar for 15 minutes until syrupy and reduced. Remove from heat. Broil the asparagus 8 to 10 minutes, just until done. To serve, arrange asparagus on platter, drizzle with reduced balsamic syrup, extra-virgin olive oil, and shaved Parmesan cheese.

Balsamic Potatoes

2 sweet onions, chopped

1 1/2 pounds of red-skinned potatoes, cut into quarters

1/4 cup of balsamic vinegar

1/4 cup of olive oil

4 sprigs of fresh rosemary, each about 4 to 6 inches long

1 tablespoon of kosher salt (kosher salt will retain its crunchiness in the oven)

1 tablespoon of freshly ground black pepper

Place onions and potatoes in large bowl. In small bowl, whisk together balsamic vinegar, olive oil, rosemary, salt and pepper. Pour dressing over potatoes, stirring to evenly coat potatoes and onions. Pour onto heavy roasting pan. Bake in a 450-degree oven for 40 minutes until potatoes are crispy.

BALSAMIC BERRIES

2 cups strawberries, cleaned, hulled, and cut in half
1 cup raspberries, cleaned
2 tablespoons, good quality balsamic vinegar
pinch of extra fine sugar
mint sprigs for garnish

About 30 minutes before serving, place berries in glass serving bowl. Drizzle berries with vinegar, then sprinkle with pinch of sugar. Garnish with mint sprig. A perfect way to end a filling Italian meal.