



Beautiful Balsamic

The splash worth the splurge

by Michele PETERSON

James Savona

What do Luciano Pavarotti, Ferrari and traditional balsamic vinegar have in common? They all hail from Modena, Italy and are unique in their high quality. While the Ferrari might have to languish longer on your wish list, autumn is the perfect time to indulge in the mellow, golden flavor of premium balsamic vinegar. Like other luxury investments, understanding the basics can help you make the right choice. This one just happens to be found drizzled over grilled harvest vegetables or sprinkled atop sun-ripened fruit,

Pedigree

Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale or traditional balsamic vinegar was invented centuries ago in the Emilia-Romagna region of northwestern Italy. The first historical reference dates back to 1046 when the Marquis of Tuscany, Bonifacio, sent a tiny



silver cask of balsamic vinegar, on a carriage drawn by oxen, as a gift to Henry III, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

During the Renaissance, balsamic vinegar continued to be considered a precious condiment on the tables of the nobility and had a reputation as a medicinal tonic for everything from sore throats to labor pains.

Today, although other areas produce balsamic vinegar, the heart of traditional balsamic vinegar remains in the historic towns of Modena and Reggio Emilia where proud families continue to follow traditional techniques handed down from generation to generation.

Some still use barrels first used many centuries ago.

Process

The word vinegar originates from the French *vin aigre* or sour wine, referring to the

process by which bacterial fermentation turns alcohol to acetic acid. While other vinegars can be made from cider, rice and malt, balsamic vinegar is an aged reduction of sweet Trebbiano di Spagna, Lambrusco and Spergola grapes. The grape juice, known as "must" is cooked slowly in cauldrons over an open flame until the water content is reduced by more than 50% and the fruit becomes syrup.

Traditional balsamic vinegar grows richer and darker as it ages. After one year, the young vinegar is transferred to smaller and smaller barrels of aromatic woods such as oak, chestnut, ash, mulberry and juniper so it can absorb the flavours of the different woods. It is then aged several years in cool, dark cellars and is bottled only after the vinegar has mellowed.

After 12 years of aging, the blend earns the designation Traditional Balsamic Vinegar and, after 25 years, *extra vecchio*.

Selecting a Vinegar

"The best balsamic vinegars contain only grapes with nothing else added," explains James Savona, President of Brunello Imports, Canada's largest importer of premium balsamic vinegar.

"Traditional balsamic vinegar from Modena is something precious," says Savona. At \$450 for 100 ml, he keeps the company's stock of 50-year-old blend of Pedroni Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale Di Modena, their priciest vinegar, under lock and key. Vinegar of this quality is subjected to rigorous examination by a panel of experts and must conform to criteria that include color, consistency and a pleasantly acid aroma that hints of the woods used. A

