

If You Think Balsamic Vinegar is a Passing Fad; Think Again

I've been in the culinary field for close to thirty years now and have worked at several high-end restaurants and clubs; but balsamic vinegar wasn't always part of the inventory. Yes, we had all the basics from red and white wine, cider and tarragon; but it wasn't until about 15 years ago or so that it became more mainstream in the food service industry. Although it was only introduced in the United States about thirty years ago, it has been historically dated to Italy for nearly 1000 years.

Balsamic vinegar originated and is only produced in the regions of Modena and Reggio in Italy. Copper cauldrons are filled with sweet white grapes and are slowly cooked over an open flame. The grapes are cooked until about half the water content has evaporated; the remains are referred to as "the must". This is placed in wooden barrels and older balsamic vinegar is added to assist in the acetification. The vinegar is periodically transferred to different wood barrels so that it can continually pick up more flavors from the wood. The vinegar is aged anywhere from 3 years to as much as 150 years.

Centuries ago, balsamic vinegar was considered a status symbol among the Romans. Only the very wealthy possessed this valuable commodity. It was first introduced for medicinal purposes; it was even thought to battle the plague. But as time went on, its culinary value began to emerge.

Making a perfect balsamic vinegar was considered a form of art. Barrels were even started for each child born and then given away to the guests at their wedding.

Remember, when buying balsamic vinegar, you get what you pay for. The longer it's aged, the better the finished product.

Balsamic Vinaigrette Dressing

Yield: 1 cup

- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 garlic clove, finely minced
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 6 TBL extra virgin olive oil
- 6 TBL Canola or Vegetable Oil
- 1/2 tsp oregano
- 1 tsp fresh parsley, chopped
- 1 TBL minced onion.
- 1 TBL finely chopped roasted red pepper

In a small mixing bowl, combine all ingredients with the exception of the canola and olive oil. Slowly whisk in the oil until completely combined and emulsified. Refrigerate until used.

Garden Vegetable and Mozzarella Salad with Balsamic Vinaigrette Dressing

Prepare the dressing at least one day ahead to get the full flavor of the ingredients.

On a decorative platter, alternate slices of tomatoes, sweet onion (such as Vidalia), cucumber and mozzarella cheese. Ladle the dressing down the center and top with grated parmesan cheese and fresh chopped parsley.