

How to Make Shrubs (aka Drinking Vinegars) Without a Recipe

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Here at Food52, we love recipes—but do we always use them? Of course not. Because once you realize you don't always need a recipe, you'll make your favorite dishes a lot more often. Today: We're making a zingy, fruity drinking vinegar that's all a matter of ratio. (And yes, it makes for great cocktails, too.)

If you've never had a shrub before, it's just about the most refreshing thing you can think to drink—especially in the summer. It starts with a syrup that's a combination of vinegar, fruit, and sugar. The fruit tastes like its truest self and the vinegar cuts right through it. Add it to a glass, then bubbles to make it bright. The alcohol is optional, but awfully good.

You can make a shrub two ways: the hot way (fresh fruit simmered in simple syrup) and the cold way (fresh fruit tossed with sugar and left to sit for a few days). Shrub purists may tell you that a shrub made the hot way is not a *true* shrub—and maybe they're right. But true shrub or not, it's delicious and a fast way to get a fruity, vinegary syrup that works just as well in a drink as a more authentic, cold process shrub. If you're short on time, the hot way is a good approach to take; if you can be a little more leisurely, try the cold process—I do prefer the flavor of a cold process shrub, which is a little less jammy and more true to the fruit in flavor.

Here's how you do it:

1. Gather ingredients.

Shrubs are a matter of ratio: **The sweet spot (the sweet-tart spot, that is) is a 1:1:1 ratio of fruit, sugar, and vinegar.** A good place to start for cold process shrub is 1 pound chopped fruit, 2 cups sugar, and 2 cups vinegar; for the heated process, go for 1 pound fruit, 1 cup sugar, 1 cup water, and 1 cup vinegar. Each method should yield about 3 cups of shrub syrup, which will keep in the fridge.

The fruit and flavorings

You can make shrubs at any time of year with nearly any kind of fruit—from summer berries and peaches (both of which I have made with great success) to apples, grapefruits, and pomegranates in the winter. I would not recommend the heated process with watermelon, however, which I tried (and which, I'm afraid to say, made my apartment smell wholly of stomach acid. Gross). **A good rule of thumb: The heated process will work well for anything you would make jam out of. For watery melons, stick to the cold process.**

If you want to make a citrus shrub, zest the (preferably organic) citrus peel off first, and use your fingers to rub the zest into the sugar until it's really fragrant—this way, you don't lose any of those good oils. Then just chop up the fruit itself, toss it with the zesty sugar, and let it sit as you would any other shrub.

That said, it doesn't just have to be a fruit shrub! Add grated fresh ginger, fresh herbs (hi rosemary, hello thyme), or spices (like whole peppercorns, cardamom pods, or bay leaves) to either the simple syrup (hot process) or the sugar-fruit mixture (cold process).

The vinegar

Most vinegars will work in shrubs, but think about how your fruit will pair with the flavor of the vinegar you select. I would steer clear of plain white vinegar, which is too intensely sharp. Apple cider vinegar is the one I use most, but white or red wine vinegar, rice vinegar, Champagne vinegar, or coconut vinegar also work very well. Balsamic adds an amazing depth to berry shrubs in particular, but you only need a splash. The rest of the vinegar can be cider or wine vinegar.

The sugar

You can use white or brown sugar; white sugar will really let the fruit flavor shine, while the brown sugar will add another element of flavor. While I haven't tried this myself yet, you could also experiment with honey, maple syrup, and agave. (Molasses would probably be too overpowering.)

Some combinations that sound particularly appealing:

- strawberries + white sugar + red wine vinegar and a splash of balsamic vinegar
- blueberries + thinly sliced ginger + cider vinegar
- nectarine + peppercorn + brown sugar + white wine vinegar
- peach + cardamom pods + honey + cider vinegar
- pomegranate + peppercorn + white sugar + red wine vinegar
- pear + star anise + brown sugar + white wine vinegar
- red plum + cardamom + brown sugar + white wine vinegar (which is what I made here)

2. Combine the sugar and the fruit, and then add vinegar.

- **For a cold process shrub**, assemble your fruit (sliced or mashed gently) in a bowl, and toss it with sugar.
- Let this mixture sit, covered securely with a dishtowel, on your kitchen counter for about 2 days. Stir once a day. It should start to look very juicy. After 2 days, strain the mixture into a measuring cup, discard the fruit, then combine the syrup with approximately an equal amount of vinegar (again, your choice, but cider vinegar is a good place to start)—but do this slowly, tasting as you go so that you get a shrub that is just sharp enough for you—especially with a zingier fruit like raspberries or citrus. That's it! Pour it into a jar and stick it in the fridge.

For a hot process shrub, make a simple syrup (equal parts sugar and water) in a medium saucepan over low heat, stirring until the sugar is completely dissolved. Add your sliced fruit and bring the syrup-fruit mixture to a low simmer. Let it bubble away until the syrup has become the color of the fruit and the fruit looks tired. Stir in the vinegar and bring the

mixture just to a simmer; strain out and discard the fruit (or serve it over vanilla ice cream), and pour the shrub into a jar. Keep it in the fridge.

3. Drink up!

Fill a tall glass with ice, pour in a splash of shrub, and top it off with seltzer water, stirring a bit to incorporate the shrub. Or add a shot of booze: I like gin and found it to be delicious with a strawberry-balsamic shrub, but whiskey or vodka would also be delicious. Or do away with the seltzer water altogether and substitute Champagne or another sparkling wine instead.

No matter which process you use, a shrub will keep for a long time in your refrigerator—I would count on a couple of months at least (though I've not yet had one stick around more than a month, so I couldn't say for sure). The shrub should *not* ferment, bubble, or become slimy. If it does, scold it, throw it away, and start anew.