

Traditional Balsamic Vinegar de Modena DOP is sold only in 100ml (3 oz) bottles and easily retails for \$100 or more.

To understand why, continue reading:

Balsamic Vinegar of Modena is a very special vinegar that roots back to ancient Roman times and instead of using wine like other Italian vinegars, the product is obtained by using the cooked juice of the grape, known as the “must”. There are several different types of balsamic vinegars and unfortunately, sometimes they are represented with false claims; for example for their aging claims, quality of ingredients and origin. This has led to some misconceptions and originated some confusion among traders and consumers. This presentation aims to clarify the different types and its production so to offer a better understanding of Balsamic Vinegar of Modena.

Two different recipes originated throughout history, and gave birth to the only two existing, regulated products: Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena DOP (Protected Designation of Origin) and Balsamic Vinegar of Modena IGP (Protected Geographic Indication) Again, these two items are the only two items regulated and approved by the Italian Government and European Union.

1. Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena DOP

What is Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena?

It is a special vinegar produced by obtaining the juices (must) from pressing the grapes and this must is cooked for hours over direct fire until a brown, syrupy liquid with a good grape smell is obtained (cooked must.) This cooked must is then aged in wooden barrels for a minimum of 12 years following the Solera System.

These barrels are made of different types of wood, such as cherry, chestnut, oak, mulberry, and ash and they each hold different capacities (the first barrel holds about 40 gallons and the last one holds about 2 gallons capacity). Normally there are sets of 5-7 or 9 barrels. This set is called “batteria”.

The Solera system, also called ‘topping up,’ calls for the continuous (every year) and consequent topping up of the cooked must into the next smaller barrel so each year the ‘newest’ cooked grape must is blended with the one from the previous year already contained in the barrel.

It is very important to understand that it is constantly a blend of new harvests with previous one which explains why the legislator in Italy forbids any aging claims on labels for this item. The legislator also strictly forbids any aging claim due to the fact that there is only an organoleptic test performed to the product. In fact, the only way to determine a precise age is actually with a Carbon 13 test.

The barrels used for ageing the vinegar are stored in attics in which the temperature and different seasons determine the speed of fermentation. In the cold winter months the process of fermentation is slow and with the heat and humidity of the summer months the fermentation process speeds up and causes a natural concentration of the grapes by evaporation. Each barrel actually absorbs some of its content, allowing for the aroma of each particular wood.

After a minimum of 12 years (again, according to the Solera system, so in reality it is really the age of the barrel and not of its content) the result is a very sweet, thick, rich, and complex vinegar. The producer can submit the product to a panel of Master Tasters within the Consortium of Producers of Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena (CPABTM). This panel of master tasters only performs an organoleptical evaluation on the color, viscosity, taste, flavor and aroma. If the product scores more than 250 points the producer is allowed to bring

the product to the Consortium who actually fills the bottle for all their associates, so the product is actually packed by the Consortium and not by the individual producer. By law, the product may only be bottled in a unique 100ml bottle (designed by a famous designer: Giugiaro) and this particular bottle is the same for all the producers. This is an important step in controlling and guaranteeing the quality of the product.

Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena is produced in 2 distinctive qualities, being the Red Seal (one that is aged for a minimum of 12 years) and the Gold Seal (one that is aged for a minimum of 25 years). Not to be said, Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena DOP is a very expensive vinegar; it easily retails for \$ 100 for 100ml (3oz).

The price is explained by the high cost of the barrels. Balsamic vinegar barrels are actually more expensive than wine barrels because they are made of a thicker wood since they need to sustain the acidity of the content. A set of empty barrels (batteria) easily costs around 8-10 thousand USD and the cost of the raw materials are high because one loses around 30% of the original must throughout the cooking process. It is also explained by the length of time one needs to wait before actually selling the product: it takes a minimum of 12 years to be able to produce about 1 gallon per year of vinegar.

Since they couldn't really sell such an expensive and scarcely available product, few stores in Modena (Fini and Giusti) started the practice of blending Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena with strong, aged, red wine vinegar. The product they created is not as thick (easier to use), and less expensive product (wine vinegar is not expensive) but has the same types of organoleptic features as traditional (so, somehow sweeter, denser and more complex than regular wine vinegar). This process originated what is very popular and sold today in more than 60 Countries (it's among the first 5 Italian food products naturally recalled by Chefs all around the world): BALSAMIC VINEGAR OF MODENA PGI.

2) Balsamic Vinegar of Modena P.G.I.

This product is obtained by the blending and consequent fermentation of must (either cooked or concentrated) with wine vinegar. The addition of less than 2% of caramel color is also comprised by the law which is a natural product and is used to uniform and keep a consistent color.

The concentrated grape must is a vacuum process with low temperature that creates a low flavor profile with a sweet and fruity taste at a lower cost. The cooked grape must is under direct fire, burning sugars and creating a high flavor profile, full body at a higher cost (same type as used for Traditional). Even though many claim not to, it is important to understand that ALL producers use caramel coloring. It is simple to understand this due to the fact that the color of the products is always the same year after year, despite the obvious difference in characteristics from one harvest to the next.

The concentrated or cooked must or a blend of the 2 is mixed with wine vinegar that creates a mass which is then fermented and aged. It is the quality of the must along with the wine vinegar in this primary blend that is important to the quality of the final product. The quality and quantity of these ingredients can be measured by a simple lab analysis that measures the density, dried extracts, and dried extracts without sugars.

The quality of the final product is more the result of the blend of ingredients rather than the mere ageing of them. Because of this blending and due to the different quality levels of each individual harvest, exact ageing claims cannot be proven and the Italian government forbids ageing from appearing on labels.

Basically, the goal for a Balsamic Vinegar of Modena producer is to offer their clients a steady and consistent quality (taste, aroma, and flavor profile). Since each grape harvest is different, the vinegar maker needs to blend

and age different qualities for different amounts of time in order to obtain this consistency of Balsamic Vinegar of Modena PGI.

The quality of Balsamic Vinegar of Modena PGI is determined by 3 main factors: Quality of Ingredients, Quantity of Ingredients, and Ageing. Within the same category, there may be substantial differences in quality and the degree of concentration which is a very important factor in determining the quality of the final product.

A deep study was run by the AIB (The Italian Association of Balsamic Tasters) along with the CSFA (a well reputed sensory analysis center) to implement a reliable tool so they are able to grasp the true meaning and quality of Balsamic Vinegars of Modena and to steer clear of gimmicks and misrepresentation. This system determines standards of quality in which 4 basic quality categories were identified and certified, known as the "Leaf System." Those classified under the 1 Leaf Categories are the lowest grade quality with a lighter flavor profile, and those classified under the 4 Leaf Categories are the highest grade quality with a more superb taste and fuller flavor profile.

The Leaf System: The Only Quality Certified System in Today's Market

3) White Balsamic and Balsamic Condiments **(The type of balsamic sold at The Olive & The Stone, Chester, NJ)**

Years ago, chefs began searching for a product with the same characteristics of Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, but without the same dark color in order to not discolor the presentation of certain salads or prepared dishes.

White balsamic condiment was created and, however similar to balsamic vinegar of Modena, it still obtained some different characteristics. For example, the taste of the product is fruitier and less bodied than the "regular" balsamic vinegar of Modena and the flavor is sharper and less woody.

In addition, some products are manufactured with similar ingredients and procedures, but for one reason or another are not allowed to be called Balsamic Vinegar of Modena PGI or Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena DOP. If it is not manufactured according to Italian Law, or if it is manufactured the same way Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena is but it is not packed in the same 3oz bottle, it has to be called Balsamic Condiment.

This is a very grey area and although I mentioned that some condiments are very similar to the real thing, it is important to be skeptical when buying balsamic condiments, as some may also be a product of completely different ingredients under the same name.

Important:

DOP = Denomination of Protected Origin PGI = Protected Geographic Indication

PGI and DOP are very strict protective systems used to preserve the traditional methods of food production for specific areas and regions. (For example, all Balsamic Vinegar of Modena PGI must be produced under very strict procedures and guidelines within the administrative boundaries of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy)

Balsamic Vinegar sold at The Olive & The Stone, Chester NJ is a Traditional-Style Condimento

Our Traditional Style Condimento, Aged Up to 18 Years is a dark condimento of the highest quality and is made in Modena, Italy from cooked, high quality caramelized grape must from Trebbiano and Lambrusco grapes. The grape must in our Condimento is cooked over an open wood fire, just as DOP Traditional Balsamic grape must is. It is cooked down to the same consistency, density and dry solid extracts, actually. DOP Traditional Balsamic dictates that wood-fire-cooked grape must is then put directly in to old, fired wood barrels which were used to age balsamic in years past. These barrels become progressively smaller as the product becomes thicker and naturally evaporates over time. The barrels as well as the product they once contained, add character to the must over time. Nothing is ever added to the cooked, caramelized must of DOP balsamic. Pro-biotic wild yeast and acetic bacteria colonize it and eventually raise the acidity. It slowly ages in this manner and turns in to "vinegar" by itself over the course of many years, hence the scarcity and price tag.

By Italian law, DOP balsamic must then undergo strenuous sensory evaluation as well as laboratory analysis which measures extensive criteria including and most importantly, dry extract solids. Once approved as DOP, it can then only be sold in 100 ml. bottles which are identical based on two exclusive regions of production, Emilio Reggiano or Modena Italy. The bottles from each region are uniform in size and shape regardless of who produced the balsamic. The consortium then licenses the producer to use the 100 ml. DOP bottle which is then, wax sealed, numbered and boxed for individual sale. The wax sealed numbered bottles will never be sold unboxed, as a loose bottle by itself. Furthermore, it is never, sold in other types of bottles outside of the 100ml. DOP bottle, and certainly never in bulk, EVER! Furthermore, this product is rarely if ever used for cooking. It is far too prized and expensive. For this reason, it's typically served drop by drop on a spoon, like a digestif after a meal. We urge you to open a tiny wax sealed and numbered bottle of DOP balsamic and compare it with our Traditional Style Balsamic Condimento of Modena, Italy. The similarity is remarkable.

The primary difference between DOP Balsamic and our condimento, is that out of the gate our Condimento is inoculated with a very small amount of premium quality, barrel aged Italian wine vinegar. The barrel aged wine vinegar introduces the natural acetic bacteria and yeast and begins the process from cooked grape must to "condimento". It is then aged using the Solera method which dictates that it be placed in a succession of different types of very old, fired wood barrels, each of which previously contained residual amounts of older balsamic dating back as far as 18 years and in some cases 25 years. It's topped off as it moves from barrel to barrel, based on the Solera method, with younger, wood fire cooked grape must as it naturally evaporates. For this reason, no product except actual DOP certified balsamic in licensed 100 ml. bottles can make an actual age claim - ever! However, you can accurately and confidently say that our product has been "aged for up to 18 years" if you would like to mention age at all. However, age is not a criteria of quality.

As with DOP balsamic, our condimento's very low acidity of 4% is a function of the grape must being naturally cooked down, condensed, caramelized and aged without the addition of much else, unlike so many "balsamic-like" products on the market which are not from Modena and are comprised almost wholly of poor quality wine or distilled vinegar, thickeners, color and sweeteners. The density and complexity of our condimento are a testament to the fact that it is made in Modena in the Solera method from high quality grape must, cooked down over an open wood fire. Its' very high level of dried extract solids is close to if not identical to that of DOP Traditional Balsamic sold exclusively in 100ml. bottles. Please use this much more meaningful criteria when educating your customers about why our Balsamic Condimento is so delicious, complex and the highest quality available.