

## PER TUA INFORMAZIONE

# Balsamic Vinegar

## You Get What You Pay For

By JOE SANO



When considering the extra-vecchio average price of \$60 per oz. most are not splashing the *tradizione* vinegars onto their salad greens.

Most of us use the affordable and available “Aceto Balsamico di Modena” vinegar. While one of the three protected vinegars it is not considered to be of artisan quality. It is usually aged anywhere from two months to three years. Artificial coloring, caramel, sweeteners, guar gum etc. maybe added to give it the color, flavor and thickness of the *tradizione* vinegars. These imported, commercially made vinegars are sometimes blended with other vinegars.

Just remember in order to use the term “di Modena” the vinegar must meet the European Union’s IGP certification (Indicazione Geografica Protetta) guaranteeing authenticity and quality. There are many products calling themselves Balsamic Vinegar ( non-licensed term) which have no connection to the three discussed in this article. They are made to taste like the real aceto but it is achieved with blended vinegars and the additives mentioned earlier without any ties to the licensed Italian provinces.

In order to be called balsamic vinegar of Modena, at least one phase of production of the vinegar or one primary ingredient (MOSTOCOTTA) must occur or come from the licensed regions. Obviously that definition gives a lot of flexibility from using just plain vinegars from the regions and adding various additives stretched into having non-native vinegars imported into the licensed regions, where they are mixed into a finished product.

Let’s not forget that there exist countless versions of non-certified balsamic vinegars. Balsamic vinegar is not a licensed product name. Only the 3 designations named in this article are the true Italian licensed products. Two are expensive and one is commonly used.

“You get what you pay for!” The IGP/PDO certification, the bottle’s size, shape, and the ingredients list will help you to determine if you are using a pricey *Tradizione*, a commercially made “Aceto Balsamico di Modena” or a mass produced non-certified facsimile.

Balsamic vinegar is a big time endeavor employing thousands who grow, harvest, blend, monitor, package, ship, wholesale and retails the finished product. It surprises few that earlier this year a plot was uncovered where grape must was being fraudulently certified as grown in the licensed areas. Italian authorities shut it down and remain forever vigilant to protect the safety and authenticity of their world famous and desired food products which comprise a multi-faceted and significant portion of the nation’s economy.



Little mini- bar size 3.4 ounce [1 mL] Grugiaro designed bottles hold an aged prize worth \$20-60 per ounce.

The name balsamic vinegar doesn't sound very Italian. It sounds more like a concoction drained from the pine forests of the Adirondacks. Like the Italian language it is derived from the original Latin – "BALSAMUM", meaning "balsam – like, curative or restorative." Think ahhhh..... that's good !



Balsamic vinegar of Modena is protected under the European Union's PGI/PDO protected foods system, which stipulates it be made with grapes of the Lambrusco, Sangiovese, Trebbiano, Albana, Ancellotta, Fortana or Montuni ( the 7 sacred grapes) varieties and produced within the Italian provinces of Modena and Reggio Emilia. The "mosto cotta" (grape must) includes the grape juices, skins, seeds and stems. Licensed producers carefully heat the mosto cotta and let nature take over by letting alcohol, bacteria and sugars create these magic elixirs.

### There are 3 protected Balsamic vinegar products:

1. **Aceto Balsamico *Tradizione* di Modena**  
(Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena)
2. **Aceto Balsamico *Tradizione* di Reggio Emilia**  
(Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Reggio Emilia)
3. **Aceto Balsamico di Modena**  
(Balsamic Vinegar of Modena).



The "*tradizione*" vinegars are prized throughout the world as an artisan food product. It is the large scale commercially produced Aceto Balsamico di Modena that we all recognize and can easily find and afford. They all carry European Union PDO (Product Designation of Origin) certification attesting to their age, quality, origin and authenticity.

These *tradizione*/special vinegars are considered to be a "condiment" to be dripped or dribbled possibly on some shaved Parmigiano Reggiano, fresh fruit, or maybe some sliced mortadella etc... Some will splurge and drizzle it on desserts like zambaione, latte alla Portogheese, Panna Cotta or even sipped as an aperitif.

These highly prized *tradizione* vinegars are boiled down to 30% minimum sugar content and allowed to ferment and age for a minimum of 12 years. The traditional balsamic vinegar has a rich, deep brown glossy sheen to it and the taste reflects it being aged in casks of either chestnut, cherry, oak, mulberry, or juniper wood. The *tradizione* vinegars are produced in time consuming labor intensive small quantities.

A process is used whereby a series of usually five casks ranging from 50L to 15L are used to age the product. The smallest 15 L cask yields the aged finished product. The master maker just determines how much product to draw from each cask and that he replaces that amount from the next largest cask and so on down the line. The largest cask has the youngest mosto cotto so the age of the vinegar is an average age based on how it is been blended from the other casks but it is never less than the stated age. After samples are approved by five experts for taste, smell, and appearance, the *tradizione* final product is allowed to be sold in its designer made bottles and packaging.

The Reggio Emilia red label vinegar is the 12 year old standard followed by the 18-year-old silver label and finally the 25+ year old gold. Modena Uses a two-tiered system of a white capped greater than 12-year-old Vinegar and a gold cap for the extra-vecchio/greater than 25-year-old liquid.