

The Story of our Balsamic Vinegar

How old is your balsamic vinegar?

Okay. That is a good question with a very complicated answer. First of all, most customers that will ask you that question are asking because they have seen “18 year old” balsamic out in the marketplace before and maybe they have also purchased that product before. **The answer they are expecting to hear from you is “18 years old”.**

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In order to answer this question properly, so that you have a complete understanding, I need to explain the different grades of balsamic vinegar in general. There is a lot of misinformation on the internet and a lot of intentional and unintentional false information out there in the marketplace.

In Italy there is a product called “Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena”. This product is highly regulated. Sort of like Champagne can only come from Champagne, France, and must be made by a specific method, with specific grapes, etc. Producers must join a consortium. Sort of like in the US, when a producer wants to be certified as organic, they have to have the USDA certify their fields and their production facility, etc. and they have to pay the USDA for this. The consortium in Italy will certify the producer’s operation and make sure they are following the specific methods for production.

“Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” must be aged for a minimum of 12 years. It is made with 100% grape must (crushed grapes), which is cooked and caramelized in an open vat, reduced to about 30% of the original volume. The product is then put into a series of barrels that gradually reduce its size, called a “battonage” 25% of the product is left behind in each barrel as the other 75% is moved to the next smaller barrel. This process allows continuous mixing of each subsequent year’s harvest. Once the product has exited the last barrel, at a minimum of 12 years, then the producer will take a sample to the consortium where they will perform both sensory analysis, (tasting by a panel of experts) and chemical analysis (laboratory testing). If, and only if, it passes these tests, then the *consortium* will bottle it. NOT the producer. It will be bottled in 100ml bottles that bear the seal of the consortium. It will never be bottled in any other size bottle and will never be sold in bulk. **Any product that is not sold like this, is not this product.**

You can buy “Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” in the US in stores like Williams-Sonoma. It will be high on a shelf in a fancy box and it sells for between \$200-\$250 for a 100ml bottle.

The rules in Italy are very strict and any balsamic that is not “Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” is not even allowed to have an age claimed on the label, regardless of how old it actually is.

The product that we sell and the product our competitors sell, is not this product. Our product is in a category called “Balsamic Vinegar of Modena”. Within this category are several quality levels. These are determined by the producer and each producer comes up with their own rating system. The most common were 4, 8, 12 or 25 “star” and 1, 2, 3 or 4 “leaf”, more recently, one of the largest producers in Italy, DeNigris changed their system to Bronze, Silver, Gold or Platinum “Eagle”. Regulations on this category are not as strict. The product will be made with a certain percentage of grape must and a certain percentage of red wine vinegar. The red wine vinegar used must be aged for a minimum of 10 years (by law). They must be aged in a barrel for a minimum of 2 months (yes, months, not years).

Typically, a “4 star” will have 25% must and 75% red wine vinegar. A “25 star”, “4 leaf” or “platinum eagle” will typically be between 60-65% must with the balance being red wine vinegar. Our true competitors, selling to actual olive oil and vinegar tasting stores, are selling a product that is in the 25-star category. We deal directly with a producer in Italy and we have our balsamic is made specifically for us, to our specifications with 80% must and only 20% red wine vinegar. This is why our balsamic is thicker, sweeter and less acidic than our competitors.

***The thickness and sweetness are typically what customers like about this product and I believe this gives us our strongest competitive advantage. We’ve heard reports of our competitors telling customers that we use thickeners like cornstarch and added sugar like high fructose corn syrup. This is ridiculous and untrue. The thickness comes from the higher concentration of grape must, which is the source of the sugar, which is why it is why it is sweeter. There are no added sweeteners or thickeners.

Okay, so with all that said, you still want to know “how old is your balsamic?”

The truth is, I don’t have an “official” answer. As stated earlier, the producers in Italy are forbidden by law from claiming any age unless it is “Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena”. However, I have been told in face to face meetings by two different producers, that our product has been aged in barrels for somewhere between 3-4 years depending on supply and demand. They said this is true for similar quality products as well (25 star).

So where did 18 year old balsamic come from? Good question. It was completely made up, just marketing. There are no specific regulations here in the US to prevent this deception. And to their credit, most store owners aren’t purposely trying to deceive their customers, they just don’t know any better. They are just repeating what they were told. I was selling “18 year” balsamic for the first six months I was in the business before I learned the truth from one of my customers, who is Italian and judges balsamic vinegar competitions.

We call our Balsamic “Traditional Style”. Key word is “style”. Like I stated earlier, our balsamic is made specifically for us to our specifications. We wanted to get our product as close to the real thing as possible in taste, texture, balance of sweet and bitter, acidity, density and viscosity. It is not “Traditional Style Balsamic Vinegar of Modena”. But at an average of \$18 per 375ml bottle retail (less than \$6 wholesale), you can afford to actually use it, versus \$200-250 retail for 100ml of “Traditional Style Balsamic Vinegar of Modena”.

So, for the customer that insists that they have 18-year-old balsamic and wants to argue with you, here are a couple of points to make to convince anyone but a complete fool.

#1 Impossible time frame. Until 2006 there were approximately zero “Olive Oil and Balsamic Vinegar Tasting Stores” in the US or Canada. Today there are about 600+ stores in the US and Canada. If the product is really 18 years old, then that means in 1990 someone in Modena, Italy sat down with a crystal ball and forecasted exactly how much product they would need to produce to supply all these stores with “18-year-old” balsamic. We import 40 ft containers of double stacked barrels (55 gallon /220 liter barrels) every few weeks and we are just one company.

#2 Impossible cost. If a producer can get \$200-250 retail for 100ml of 12-year-old product. Why would they sell at \$16-20 retail for 375ml of 18-year-old product? \$2.00-2.50 per liter for 12-year-old vs. \$0.04-\$0.05 per liter for 18-year-old. So, 40 times less expensive for 50% older product. Sounds legit, right?

So how do you compete with these other stores and deal with a mis-educated customer? Store owners call their product all different names - "Traditional Style", "Riserva", "Special Reserve", "Signature Reserve", "Cask 18", "Aged", "18 year", "25 year", etc... Because of the process of blending barrels and always leaving a portion (25%) behind in the barrel to mix with the new batch, There really isn't an exact age and every bottle that comes out of the process could potentially have some portion (albeit very small) that is as old as the oldest barrel used. Some people say that is aged "up to" 18 years.

I say focus on the tasting experience and explain that ours is thicker and sweeter than some of our competitors because it has a higher percentage of grape must and less red wine vinegar. That is the truth. The sale really comes down to the tasting experience. If the customer tastes the product and likes it, they will buy it. If you lose a sale because it is not 18 years old, then at least you still have your integrity, and that is worth more than a sale.

A few other notes...

You will see in the grocery store a product called "balsamic glaze". This product does have added sugar/corn syrup/high fructose corn syrup, caramel coloring and other additives and it will be on the nutritional label. It is cheap and terrible. A side by side tasting with our product will be a night and day difference. You might consider keeping a bottle of that in your store to show a customer the difference.

You will see various claims of different ages in grocery stores too. "5-year-old", "12-year-old", etc. It is usually just 4 star or 8-star balsamic vinegar with different packaging.

What is the difference between white balsamic and dark balsamic? The white balsamic is made with white grapes yes, but so is the dark balsamic. The dark balsamic gets the dark color from the sugars caramelizing during the cooking process while it is being reduced and concentrated. The white balsamic is reduced in a vacuum chamber. This allows the water content to evaporate at a much lower temperature, below the temperature that sugar will caramelize at. White wine vinegar is used instead of red wine vinegar and it is not put in wood barrels. The taste is a little lighter and less bitter without the caramelization. Even though the sugar content is the same as the dark, it can actually taste sweeter because the bitter does not offset the sweetness.

In conclusion, all of this information is for your own education and knowledge. Don't try to educate the world one customer at a time. You will not succeed, and they will not listen. The sales window and the customers attention span are short, focus on the tasting experience, recipe and use suggestions and make the sale.

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