

## Picky Eater: Balsamic vinegars

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For centuries, the term "balsamic vinegar" has been used to describe one of the most highly prized liquids in Italy — grape must that has been cooked, then aged until it becomes so sweet, smooth and complex, it can be sipped from a liqueur glass.

In the Modena and Reggio Emilia regions of Italy, law dictates that any vinegar labeled Balsamico di Modena Tradizionale can only be made with a handful of grapes, and must be aged in the barrel for a minimum of 12 years. Authentic balsamics will have a seal and a "leaf-rating." The more leaves, the finer the vinegar. Vinegar aged 12 years earns the title "tradizionale"; 25 years earns the label "extravecchio."

The problem is that these precious liquids cost \$50 to \$400 a bottle — more than I can pay for a condiment that I use several times a week. Fortunately, the flavor of balsamic vinegar has become so popular that it has inspired masses of mimickers, entrepreneurs who work hard to find ways to duplicate the flavor and viscosity of authentic balsamic — with varying degrees of success.

So I ran a taste test of some lesser-but-possibly-tasty balsamic vinegars available here in the Bay Area. I avoided vinegars that list caramel color or flavorings on the label, but included some that have added red wine vinegar, as I find acidic versions

useful when dressing salads or kicking up sauces. Here's a sampling of vinegars for special occasion and everyday use.

### Special occasion

**Mia's Kitchen Balsamic Vinegar Reduction:** This interesting little jug from Napa's Sebastiani family contains a super-thick, unctuous reduction with cherry notes that would be perfect for drizzling on grilled meat, risotto, even ice cream. It's about \$17 for 8.4 ounces and can be found at Draeger's, Lunardi's and some Whole Foods Markets.

**Gourmet Blends Traditional Balsamic:** This small-batch, 25-year-old Modena vinegar, with medium weight and a gorgeous floral nose, has bright berry and blossom flavors and a pleasant tang. It's a good candidate for dipping bread or drizzling over berries or creamy dishes. Find it at [www.gourmetblends.us](http://www.gourmetblends.us) (\$18 for 6 ounces).

**Sonomic:** More sweet than acidic, this Sonoma Valley Portworks balsamic tastes of figs and berries. I'd use it to complement vanilla ice cream, bread pudding or even apple pie. It's \$18 at [www.portworks.com](http://www.portworks.com).

### Everyday use

**Fini:** At \$12 for 8 ounces, this Italian vinegar has bright blueberry and plum flavors, and enough acidity to be used in both savory and fruit dishes. Find it at Cost Plus World Markets and Williams-Sonoma. HHH

**Trader Joe's Gold Label Balsamic:** Far more flavorful than the jug-sized Trader Joe's balsamic, this smooth, \$8 vinegar has a touch of plum that would work well with chicken or fish, or to dress a citrus

salad. HH½

Napa Valley Harvest: At \$6 per bottle, this is a solid, low-budget pick. Despite its slightly cooked fruit flavor, it manages to add interest to roasted chicken, pasta with vegetables or a bowl of white beans. Find it at gourmet markets. HH

Mazzetti: Medium-sweet with a cooked fruit flavor, I'd relegate this official-looking, two-leaf, cane-wrapped bottle of vinegar to sauces or dressings — it's too acidic to serve as a dipper or a dessert-topper, and I find it overpriced at \$12 per 8.45 ounces. Available at gourmet stores. HH

World Market Traditional Balsamic: Like so many inexpensive balsamics, this one has added red wine vinegar, which makes it considerably harsher than authentic balsamic. It offers little flavor and has a sharp acid kick that should be limited to salads. It's \$6 for 28 ounces. H½

Casa di Olivo: This inexpensive vinegar is so harsh, it will eat a hole in your tongue if you use it as a bread-dipper; and will do little more than turn your salad or sauce brown. The only thing it has going for it is price, but for \$3 per 33-ounce bottle, I'd buy a gallon of red wine vinegar instead.

**Samples of most products reviewed in this column are provided by manufacturers. Contact Jolene Thym at [timespicky eater@gmail.com](mailto:timespicky eater@gmail.com). Read more Picky Eater at [www.thepicky eateronline.com](http://www.thepicky eateronline.com).**