

**PENNY SAVER NEWS**

February 28, 2013

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Would the Real Balsamic Vinegar Please Stand Up!

Balsamic vinegar is a popular condiment these days. It's added to everything from salsa to butterscotch pudding, drizzled on everything from ears of corn to fillets of salmon, and of course every salad and fruit in between. But what makes vinegar *balsamic*, and why does it have so many more calories than cider vinegar? Those calories are why someone called my office with the question recently.

It's true that balsamic vinegar has a lot more calories. A cup of cider vinegar has 48 calories, a cup of balsamic has 208! Translated into tablespoons, that is 3 for cider compared to 13 for balsamic. But if vinegar is made by fermenting sugars into acid, where do all those calories come from? Well, acetic acid (vinegar's main chemical) does give us a few calories itself.

But balsamic vinegar is special. You might have noticed if you use it that it's thicker than regular vinegar. Although it looks almost black, it starts with white wine that is boiled to concentrate it. So it starts out thicker and with more sugars. Then it is aged in wooden casks. That's where it picks up the balsamic flavor and darker color. It's aged for years, at least 8 years to as many as 25 years for the really good stuff! Along the way in the aging some moisture gradually evaporates, so it gets thicker and thicker, as well as darker and darker.

True, real Balsamic vinegar is only made in two places in Italy – Modena and Reggio Emilia. It is one of those foods with 'Protected Geographical Status'. Legally you can only call your product *traditional balsamic vinegar* if it was made there, and under the supervision of the producers' organization. They keep close tabs because they want to protect the quality of what goes out with their name on it. Each area has different colored labels or caps to show how old the vinegar in that bottle is. It's like Vidalia onions. They might be big sweet onions but only if they were grown in certain parts of Georgia can they be sold as Vidalias.

As you might expect, when it takes 8 to 25 years to make the real thing, you don't get a lot of it very quickly. And it costs a pretty penny. But given our big tastes for different, exotic, special or imported foods, there is not enough traditional balsamic vinegar to go around. So of course there are

different categories of balsamic vinegar, and most of the products on our grocery store shelves are not the real thing. Most of the grocery store products are in the category called condiment balsamic vinegar. It's quick to produce, it costs a lot less, and there is a lot more of it.

Condiment balsamic vinegar also starts with white wine vinegar. But instead of years in wooden casks, it is darkened by adding caramel coloring. Instead of thickening with slow evaporation, it is thickened by food gums or corn starch. And additional flavorings can be added to give it the balsamic flavor. Faster and cheaper fit our pocketbooks. But both caramel coloring and corn starch add calories. So condiment balsamic vinegar has four times as many calories.

Usually you just need a little bit to season a dish. It has a bit of woody taste, a little sweet and a little sour. It definitely adds a different tang to salad dressing, glazes for meats, fish or roasted vegetables, and a wonderful contrast to sweets. The condiment-class products will give you a good idea of the flavor, and are certainly affordable enough to give one a try. Heating it brings out the sweetness and reduces the acidic tang. Here's an interesting way to take carrots from simple to special with balsamic vinegar and apricots. Give it a try!

#### Fruity Spiced Carrots

2 Tbsp margarine	1 lb carrots (about 6 medium)
½ cup chicken broth or water	½ cup dried apricots, chopped
1 tsp honey	1 tsp balsamic vinegar
¼ tsp ground cinnamon	¼ tsp ground cloves
2 green onions, thinly sliced	

Peel carrots and slice into thin coins. Heat margarine in saucepan, add carrots and cook and stir for 3 minutes. Add rest of ingredients except onions, cover and simmer 4-5 minutes until carrots are tender. Add onions, cover and simmer 1-2 minutes longer. Season with salt and pepper if desired. Serves 4.

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