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FOOD & DRINK

Harness the Power of Sour With Homemade Vinegar

Brew up a batch of your own vinegar and join the revolution fermenting in kitchens across the nation. Here's how to do it, plus recipes for a bright vegetable marinade and a bracingly sour cocktail



Apple Cider Vinegar PHOTO: ALPHA SMOOT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, FOOD STYLING BY HEATHER MELDROM, PROP STYLING BY CARLA GONZALEZ-HART

By Jackie Cooperman

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EVEN BY OBSESSIVE-CHEF standards, Ryan Hardy has included a rather peculiar feature in his West Village apartment: a cedar closet holding several gallons of white wine vinegar he's been fermenting since 2006. "Very few people make vinegar in the old French way. It requires quite a bit of commitment," said Mr. Hardy, chef and partner at Manhattan's Charlie Bird restaurant.

That's changing. In line with a growing interest in the health and flavor-boosting benefits associated with fermented foods, chefs around the country are turning everything from apple cider to leftover Pinot Noir into house-made vinegars.

Mr. Hardy began making vinegar by chance, when the compressor broke in the wine refrigerator at his former restaurant, Montagna at the Little Nell in Aspen, Colo., leaving him with thousands of dollars' worth of overheated, undrinkable white Burgundy. Wanting to salvage the wine, Mr. Hardy began the long process of making vinegar, which involves using a bacterial starter called a "mother" or SCOBY (Symbiotic Colony Of Bacteria and Yeast), which can look like anything from a cloudy substance inside the bottle to a rubbery disc that floats on top. The mother converts the alcohol in the wine to acetic acid, the source of vinegar's sour punch. Mr. Hardy has been nurturing his mother bacteria for nearly a decade, siphoning off samples for departing sous-chefs and transporting it in the passenger seat on cross-country drives.

"We use [vinegar] to pickle tomatoes, which we serve with oysters. We dress herbs in it and serve them with roast chicken. And we use cider vinegar on fruit-based salads, like blood



Scapece ALPHA SMOOT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, FOOD STYLING BY HEATHER MELDROM, PROP STYLING BY CARLA GONZALEZ-HART

- [Scapece Recipe](#)
- [Apple Cider Vinegar Recipe](#)

orange with chicory greens and radicchio,” said Mr. Hardy. He also drinks a tablespoon of his wine vinegar daily as a digestive aid.

Other chefs share the affinity, using vinegars for tang, brightness and to preserve and pickle vegetables and anchovies. Bartenders, too, are finding that a splash of sour can do wonders. At Lincoln Restaurant in Portland, Ore., owner and bar director David Welch created the Springboard, an aged balsamic vinegar-based cocktail, when chef Jenn Louis proffered an extra bottle of La Vecchia Dispensa’s Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena D.O.P.

“Vinegar has a sorcerer-style effect. It changes the flavor profile and mellows the burn because of the acidity,” said Mr. Welch, who combines the balsamic vinegar with orange juice, bourbon and Luxardo Maraschino Originale, a sour-cherry liqueur. “It does things you wouldn’t expect.”

Precisely because of vinegar’s capricious nature, Mr. Welch recommends that novice bartenders err on the side of caution. “The most important thing to remember is the acidity. A little bit goes a long way,” he said. “Cider vinegars are a good option if you want to avoid a more expensive aged vinegar, but do not use white wine vinegar for cocktails.”

While vinegar’s popularity happens to be on the rise right now, its role in the kitchen—as well as on the bar and in the medicine cabinet—has deep historical roots. “I think it’s been a trend since 5000 B.C.,” said Ron Silver, the owner of six Bubby’s restaurants in New York and Japan. “One of the upsides of people rediscovering fermentation is that it undoes the elimination of good bacteria caused by processed food. Your brain works better when your gut works better.”

Chef Silver makes his own vinegar from wild apples grown in upstate New York, adding it to salad dressings, sauces, soups, vegetables, roasts and drinks. In the summer, he makes a zingy, cooling, 1920s-inspired soda by blending his homemade currant sour syrup, currant jelly and sugar with cider vinegar and seltzer.



Springboard Cocktail PHOTO: ALPHA SMOOT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, FOOD STYLING BY HEATHER MELDROM, PROP STYLING BY CARLA GONZALEZ-HART

- 1½ ounces bourbon
- ½ ounce Luxardo Maraschino Originale
- ½ ounce orange juice
- ¼ ounce aged balsamic vinegar, such as La Vecchia Dispensa

Combine all ingredients in a cocktail shaker. Fill with ice and shake for 20 seconds. Strain into an ice-filled Old Fashioned glass. Garnish with a cherry and an orange twist.

—Adapted from David Welch of Lincoln Restaurant, Portland, Ore.

Whether using cider or wine vinegar, choose an unfiltered, unpasteurized brand that contains a natural bacterial starter, like Bragg. That way, you can use some of your store-bought vinegar as a starter for a batch of your own.

“As you’re making it, the whole thing smells like nail polish, and you think, ‘This can’t possibly be edible,’ ” said Mr. Hardy. “But in terms of flavor and antioxidants, you really want the living, breathing vinegar, not the crap I grew up with that sits in a cruet.” With the recipe provided at right, you’ll never have to settle for anything less.

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