



Cooking with
Viola Fuitoni

Italy by Ingredient: Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale 6/24/2021

If we all had a penny for the number of times we have read the word balsamic in menus, magazines, market shelves, advertisements, magazines we'd all be happily retired pursuing our passions by now.

Balsamic vinegar has been a long standing presence in my life. My parents mapped trips to include stops wherever they knew outstanding food would be found.

I was 6 or 7 and my parents were attending some glamorous to-do in Bologna. They had brought my sister Silvia and me along. As a shellacked mamma and papà left for their soirée, they accompanied Silvia and myself to the hotel's restaurant and left us in the care of the staff. It was during the cheese course that I first saw the burnt caramel satin of sparingly dripped aceto balsamico tradizionale.

Needless to say, we went back to Perugia with several bottle of balsamico of different ages, and while it did become a fixed present in our home, aceto balsamico tradizionale was still revered as an occasional delicacy known to few and to be shared only with the closest friends.

But the cat's been out of the bag for years and the word balsamic has been stripped of a discernible meaning around which consumers can safely gather. Disambiguating balsamic vinegar means protecting both the public who love it the craftspeople who make it. We should know what our money is buying and whom it supports. By that same token, producers can be held to criteria of responsibility and transparency.

In this workshop we will talk about how a simple word – traditional – can be a game changer in the world of balsamic vinegar and about the external makers of quality that tell real from fake. We will understand how to learn all about the life and times of traditional balsamic vinegar from one of its most revered producers, Mariangela Montanari of Ca' del Non.

And, of course, we will talk about cooking with this incredible and misunderstood ingredient.



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Pennette alle zucchini e menta con ricotta salata e balsamico tradizionale

Zucchini and mint pennette with ricotta salata and traditional balsamic vinegar

for 4 people:

3 small tender zucchini (if you find the sweet light green ones it is better)
1 spring onion
2 sprigs of mint
extra virgin olive oil as needed
salt as needed
ground black pepper to taste
12 ounces pennette (or other short pasta you like)
3 tablespoons shredded ricotta salata
a few drops of traditional balsamic vinegar

Set 3 quarts of water on the stove to come to a boil.

Slice the zucchini in half lengthwise then cut in thin half moons. Slice the onion thinly. Pick the mint leaves and julienne by stacking, rolling and cutting in thin ribbons.

Pour enough olive oil to lightly coat the bottom of a 10 to 12" skillet and heat on medium low until the oil fragrance reaches your nostrils without you bending over the stove. Add the onions, half the mint and half a teaspoon of salt. Soften until the onion has surrendered its stiffness and looks glassy.

The water should be boiling by now. Season it with 1 tablespoon of salt, stir and add the pasta. Stir again and cover to quickly bring back to the boil. Remove the lid once the boiling re-starts.

Add the zucchini to the skillet with the onions and raise the heat to medium. Cook until tender but still soulful and bright green in color, adding small bits of water if necessary to prevent from sticking and burning. Adjust salt and pepper to suit your taste and transfer to a warm bowl.

The pasta should be cooked by now. Lift it with a handheld strainer and transfer it into the bowl with the zucchini. Add 1 or 2 tablespoons of fresh olive oil, a tablespoon of pasta cooking water and 2 tablespoons of the shredded ricotta. Toss well.



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Drip 8 to 10 drops of balsamic on the pasta and toss again. Garnish with the remaining ricotta and mint top with artistically drizzled traditional balsamic vinegar. Serve right away for maximum happiness.

Pere al forno con lardo, balsamico tradizionale extravecchio e nocciole
Baked pears with lardo, traditional balsamic extra aged and hazelnuts

for 4 people

2 ripe but firm pears
1 Meyer lemon
4 paper thin slices lardo (the length of the pear)
1/4 cup chopped hazelnuts
traditional balsamic vinegar extra vecchio to taste
8 caper leaves for garnishing (or 8 regular capers rinsed and soaked)

Heat oven to 350° F.

Peel the pears and halve them. Scoop out the core. Slice horizontally from stem to base in 1/8" slices keeping each pear half together.

Arrange each half in an individual baking dish and sprinkle with Meyer lemon juice. Bake for about 15 minutes, until tender but not jammy.

Remove from the oven and immediately drape with the lardo slices. Dot with the vinegar, dust with the hazelnuts and finish with caper leaves (or capers).

Serve while still warm.



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Shopping List

Produce

- mint
- 3 small light green tender zucchini
- 1 spring onion (or shallot)
- 2 pears
- 1 Meyer lemon

Specialty – see shopping sources

- traditional balsamic vinegar from Modena
- caper leaves (can be substituted with capers)
- 8 lardo slices (can be substituted with guanciale or pancetta)

Dairy

- 2 ounces ricotta salata

Pantry

- 1 box pennette
- 1/4 cup chopped hazelnuts
- extra virgin olive oil
- salt
- pepper

Equipment List

- apron
- kitchen rags
- 1 big bowl for refuse
- 4 or 5 small bowls
- chef's, paring and bread knives
- 10 to 12" skillet or sauté pan
- pot to cook pasta
- individual baking dish (or a small one)
- grater
- wooden spoons
- handheld strainer or spider
- serving bowl
- tasting spoons

Prepping List

- print recipes
- pull all ingredients and divide according to recipe
- pull all equipment and have within arm's reach



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Shopping Sources

Gustiamo carries the traditional balsamic I like to use from acetaia Ca' del Non. There are different options at different price tiers. They also carry the caper leaves and the best hazelnuts in the world. Whatever you order from them, you can use the code `gustilovesviola` for a 10% discount.

I have a new favorite locally made pasta brand Semolina Artisanal Pasta out of Pasadena. It is available in many specialty shops, or you can order directly from their website and use the code `cookwithviola` for a 15% discount.

For lardo, Canteen Meats is based in San Rafael and you can find them at the San Rafael farmers market (by the beautiful Marin Civic Center designed by Frank Lloyd Wright) on Thursdays or Sunday or also order directly from them for shipping. They also carry pancetta and guanciale and a host of other extraordinarily crafted cured meats.