

- **Origins of Balsamic Vinegar of Modena**

Balsamic vinegar of Modena is a traditional flavoured vinegar to be found in Italian cuisine. It is used as a salad dressing together with olive oil. It is protected by the *Denominazione di Origine Controllata* and the European Union's Protected designation of origin.

Its origins are not quite clear and as it happens much is left to guesswork as nobody knows exactly how balsamic vinegar came about. Since Egyptian, Greek and Roman times there have been accounts of mixed raw musts and vinegars. In the Middle Ages, the Countess of Canossa and other aristocrats highly appreciated it. The term "balsamic" – seems to have appeared for the first time in 1747 in the "Registry of grape harvests and wine sale of the ducal wine cellar of the Duke of Modena". The adjective balsamic refers to both its intense aromatic essence and to its healing powers, as in the past it was erroneously used to heal ailments such as infections and indigestion. Balsamic vinegar therefore doesn't derive from wine itself, as with the more common vinegar but from must, which is first cooked at a temperature of 80° for a very long time, even up to forty hours. The artisan decides when it is ready and he relies on years of experience. At this stage the must has been reduced to half the amount; it is left to cool and decant for a few months in casks of glass or in steel silos. It is then transferred in wooden casks. This phase is referred to as *affinamento*: As it ages and gradually evaporates, the liquid is transferred to successively smaller casks made of different woods, absorbing the flavours of each wood and becoming more concentrated with each transfer. Some older balsamic vinegar is added to the must to create a more complex and intricate taste, and to enhance acidity. At the end of the process, the vinegar is taken from the smallest cask: each cask is filled with the contents of the preceding (larger) cask and the cooked must is added to the largest one. Five barrels are needed to complete such a process which will result in the aging of the balsamic vinegar of five years but it can well reach fifty years. Once it has reached the maturity requested, only 3 litres of balsamic vinegar will have been produced from 70 litres of must. The artisan's skills, time and aging are the most important factors in obtaining the best quality balsamic vinegar.

Balsamic vinegar's most well known characteristic is the power of exalting fragrances and flavours. Its colour is of an intense dark brown, bright and its aroma is complex and well-balanced. Ideal with Parmigiano Reggiano, strawberries and creamy ice cream. Perfect with roasts and boiled meats. Gourmets highly appreciate it for its capacity to "balance" the four basic tasting categories: aroma, acidity, body and flavour.

- **Origins of Pasta**

Pasta, Italy's best-known secret is world-renowned for its quality. Its origins are lost in the mists of time. Since there is no evidence of its true origins, many legends have sprung up. For many years there was belief that Marco Polo introduced pasta to Italy following his trip to China in 1298. This is belied, though, by various ancient manuscripts that mention pasta long before his journeys took place. Pasta was most likely introduced in Italy through the Arab conquest of Sicily. In fact around the year 1000, the first documented pasta recipe is to be found in the book "The Art of Cooking Sicilian *Maccheroni* and *Vermicelli*" by Martino Corno, who served as a chef to the powerful patriarch of Aquileia. In 1150 an Arab geographer, Al Idrisi was the author of the first historical accounts that refer to the production of dried pasta. He writes about a factory near Palermo where, "they produce pasta in the form of strings and it is exported everywhere...". In fact the pasta was delivered throughout Italy. In the eighteenth century the King of Naples, Ferdinand II, hired a renown engineer whose name was Cesare Spadaccini in order to improve production methods.

The new system involved adding boiling hot water to the flour when it had only just been grinded and using a machine in bronze which kneaded the dough as though by hand. Even nowadays the same method is applied. Our artisanal pasta is made with excellent wheat cultivars. Each shape is hand cut with bronze dies, to give the pasta more of a genuine roughness, and let dry naturally for a much longer time than industrially-produced pasta.

- **Cinta Senese sauce**

Cinta senese, 'Sienese belt', is the name given to a species of pigs marked by a broad white 'belt' or cinta running over their dark brown bodies, from flank to flank across their backs. They are reared mainly in the countryside west of Siena but also throughout Tuscany, as they easily adapt to the surrounding environment. Cinta senese meat surpasses normal pork in pleasant texture and flavour. The sauce is made up with a mixture of "cinta senese" pig meat, beef meat, tomato sauce, red wine, salt, pepper, chopped garlic, onion, carrot and celery. The sauce is traditionally served with Tagliatelle, a kind of egg pasta but is also used with other kinds of pasta, such as lasagne and grilled bruschettas.

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**Kit
of
exquisite
Italian
essentials**

Instructions for use

• Moka Espresso Coffee – maker

The Moka Espresso Coffee-maker is ideal for three cups of coffee. This product is made in Italy and is part of its culture and tradition. It complies with the most recent European standards which certify and guarantee quality and suitability for use. It is made of anodized aluminium which means that the surface of the machine is anticorrosive, scratchproof, self-cleaning, waterproof and solid.

To make an espresso use good quality Italian espresso coffee.

Directions:

- Loosen the upper knob and take out all the components
- Pour a small amount of water into the boiler, keeping it below the internal valve.
- Fill the filter to the brim with fine Italian roast coffee, without pressing it. Take care not to spill it over the sides and clean any waste before closing the machine to prevent the seals leaking during use. Now tightly close the coffee-maker.

Place the machine on a medium-sized burner set to minimum or medium heat. After about six minutes, you will hear a typical spluttering noise coming from the coffee-maker, which is the distinctive sign that the coffee is ready. Turn off the heat and then stir the coffee with a spoon. At this stage it is ready to be served.

Tips and recommendations: The first time you use the coffee-maker, wash it carefully with water. Only after it has been used several times will the coffee-maker produce espresso that tastes authentic. Do not use abrasive powders or steel wool products and do not wash in a dishwasher, but only in water, without using washing-up liquid.

• Fettuccine – Egg pasta (250 gr.)

The fettuccine package of 250 grams is ideal for 3 to 4 portions. Please follow our directions to prepare a world-renowned Italian dish: Fettuccine with Cinta Senese sauce. Fill up three-quarters of a medium-sized pot. Bring the water to a rapid boil before you add the pasta. Add the fettuccine slowly. Then add kitchen salt to the water. A very small amount of olive oil will prevent the fettuccine from clinging. Wait for a few seconds and then use a fork to prise them apart. Stir from time to time. Once the pasta is cooked pour into a colander placed in the sink. Return to the pot and add the Cinta Senese sauce; mix together for three minutes and then serve immediately. Enjoy!

• Extra virgin olive oil (250 ml) and Balsamic vinegar of Modena (100 ml)

Olive oil is widely used in Italian cuisine, for cooking or dressing salads, vegetables and meats. *La Cucina Italiana* reports that extra-virgin olive oil is the most digestible of the edible fats: it helps to assimilate vitamins A, D, K; it contains so-called essential acids that cannot be produced by our own bodies; it slows down the aging process; and it helps bile, liver and intestinal functions. It is also valued for its culinary virtues and organoleptic properties as well.

For a perfect salad dressing: put 250 grams of salad in a bowl, add a teaspoon of balsamic vinegar, salt and mix it until the salt has dissolved. Then add 2/3 of a tablespoon of oil and mix it all together. Follow the same guidelines for vegetables. With grilled meats, pour a drop of oil in the pan and taste the difference in flavour! Balsamic vinegar is also delicious on meats and cheeses, and especially on fresh Parmesan and fruit such as strawberries. Only a few drops are needed.

Learn more about Italian products

• Origins of coffee

Where does coffee come from? It seems to have originated from an Abyssinian region called Kaffa, in Ethiopia, and its name probably also derives from it. Thanks to the Arab expansion, coffee was introduced throughout the world and the first coffee house was opened in Constantinople. When did coffee become popular in Italy? In the second half of the sixteenth century, sailing vessels coming from abroad brought back the first coffee grains. Venice was the first city to taste coffee and in 1763 it was served in almost 200 coffee houses.

Today coffee is served everywhere and every country has developed its own way of preparing it. It has become the object of research and studies which have underlined its antidepressant powers and improved concentration abilities. It is a tropical tree, evergreen, with white flowers and red fruits which contain greenish grains. The coffee tree grows in a well-defined area between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer, around the Equator where climatic conditions are ideal for its growth. The coffee tree may even reach a height of 10 metres, but since it undergoes periodic pruning it is kept down to about 75 centimetres. There are over 60 species of coffee trees but only 25 are used for coffee production with Arabica and Robusta being the most in demand. Once they are separated from the fruit, the grains are dried and at a later stage are roasted. Roasting *all'italiana* (the Italian way) is done at high temperatures in order to expel the 900 essential oils which are contained in the grains.

• Origins of olive oil

The olive tree is a symbol of a very ancient Mediterranean tradition. Olive trees are cultivated in every Italian region, except Piedmont and Val d'Aosta. According to reliable sources, Italy boasts around 800 million olive trees, some of which are over a thousand years old. Each variety, of which there are around thirty, yields a particular oil with its own unique characteristics. Climate, soil, variety of tree (cultivar) and time of harvest account for the different smell and taste of different oils. Certain extra-virgin olive oils are blends of varieties of olives, while others are made from a single cultivar. In Tuscany, olive picking begins in November and if you come across olive groves you will notice nets laid out at the foot of the olive trees. Once the olives have been hand-picked, all the subsequent stages, from storage to washing, crushing and pressing must be undertaken very quickly. The oil produced from the first pressing is "extra-virgin", the purest and most alkaline olive oil with less than one percent acidity.

Oil is extracted from the crushed pulps by centrifuge or cold presses. This refers to the technique used to extract the best oil from the olives. To get the highest quality oil, the presser cannot use any heat. To accomplish this "cold-pressing", quality oil producers crush their olives with stone wheels. Hot pressing yields much greater quantity but severely impairs quality.

Olive oil must be kept in a relatively cool, dark place at a temperature not above 20 °C.