HERALD TIMES ONLINE

Taste of heaven

Some vinegars are delightful surprises, a long way from the pucker producers of childhood

By Christine Barbour

September 8, 2004

When I was a kid vinegar was clear and distilled or amber and cider, and it was chiefly used, as I recall, to fix the dye in Easter eggs. Either it, or I, have come a long way since.

Recently I was in the kitchen at Restaurant Tallent working on a Slow Food project with Chef Dave when he approached me with a vinegar bottle and a spoon. I was wary — it was vaguely reminiscent of the way my mom used to dose me with Robitussin — but in Dave's kitchen I trust him implicitly. He poured a few drops from bottle to spoon and I took my medicine like a good girl.

I wish I were a better writer so I could tell you how astoundingly good that vinegar was. It wasn't sharp or stingy or eye-watering like the vinegar of my youth, but rounded and sweet and pungent and almost vanillalike on the back of my tongue. This must be why oenophiles use so many peculiar adjectives for wine — the normal words for the things we taste don't really do the trick. I made those few drops last as long as I could, and then licked the spoon like a lollipop.

What the heck *is* that, I asked him (although in slightly stronger terms). Minus 8 vinegar, he replied, made from grapes that have been left on the vine into the autumn, when frost concentrates the sugars and flavors. It's rare, expensive and delicious, and he corked it and stowed it away where I couldn't get at it.

An obsession was born on the spot. As soon as I got home I hit the Internet, ordering my very own bottle of Minus 8, and while I was at it, a few (okay, 10) other vinegars that sounded intriguing. If people can have wine tastings, I saw no reason why I couldn't organize a vinegar tasting. By the time I was done I had assembled 15 bottles and four tasters who were willing to spend a few hours sipping them with me.

That may not be everyone's idea of a wild party, but I had a blast and learned an amazing amount about vinegar in the process.

Vinegar (vinaigre) means sour wine in French. Basically, what makes vinegar happen is that bacteria is introduced into wine, or juice, or fermented honey or grains and converts the alcohol into acetic acid. The taste of the vinegar varies with the quality and flavor of the initial wine, the bacterial culture, the container the vinegar is aged in, and the length of the aging.

Vinegars range from the everyday workhorse of white distilled vinegar, made from wood or petroleum products and great for making pickles and scrubbing coffee pots, to the pedigreed high-steppers like balsamic vinegar which, if you pay enough for it (about $180 for a very small bottle), can be a splendid thing, caramelly, rich and mellow.

Among the bottles I collected for my vinegar tasting were a champagne vinegar, a chardonnay and a zinfandel, a couple of sherry vinegars (one 50 years old), vinegars from the French port-like Banyuls and the Italian dessert wine, Vin Santo, a honey vinegar, a blueberry vinegar, an aged cider, my Minus 8, and a special balsamic that I had been hoarding for a long time. Most of these vinegars I bought online at zingermans.com.

My tasters and I sat down one morning with bottles and spoons and got to work. Some of the vinegars tasted like Easter egg dye — up-the-nose-sour, and back-of-the-mouth tart. The zinfandel, the blueberry, and the aged cider fell into this category. These were vinegars that would make a good salad dressing — usually one part vinegar to 3 parts oil, to offset the pucker.

In the middle were a range of vinegars that had their own distinct and wonderful flavors in addition to that vinegar tang. Fratelli Pofi vinegar smelled like honey and tasted like apricots. Pastry chef Kristen Tallent imagined peaches marinated in it, served with salted pistachio ice cream. The Vinagre de Banyuls was almost drinkable by itself with a nutty, aged sherry taste. It too would make a spectacular vinaigrette (try it on a watermelon and feta salad) and the chefs in the group thought it would be perfect for finishing a sauce.

The chardonnay vinegar from a small Spanish village was unexpectedly good. Very sweet and perfumey, ideal for dressing fruit or saucing seafood. The aged sherry vinegar was acidic, but had a complex and evocative aftertaste that reminded my friend Pat of "figs, raisins and other dark things." The Vin Santo was mellow but intense.

And then there was the A-list. These were vinegars that could be drizzled over fruit or foie gras or fish, or just sipped all by themselves. I have to say that the idea of "sipping vinegars" has always seemed preposterous to me, as appealing as drinking mouthwash, but that's apparently because real sipping vinegars had never come my way.

To be sippable, vinegar needs to be mellow, and flavorful and non-acidy. Such vinegar could tickle the taste buds before dinner as

an aperitif, straight up or stirred into sparkling mineral water. Or a tiny, tiny serving might be the very thing after a rich meal, to help settle the stomach and give you a well-fed glow.

Several of the midrange vinegars we tasted could be sipped but the ones on the high end of the scale demanded it. The Minus 8 is lovely with food, but it is a marvel sipped from a glass.

And then there was the legend: gold label, tradizionale balsamic. Aged for more than 50 years in wooden casks in Modena, Italy, it coats the spoon with a reddish chocolate sheen and tastes of ripe fruits and caramel and oak against a softly pungent background. The real thing is exquisite, the stuff you see dotted sparingly around the plate at a high-end restaurant, served with heirloom tomatoes or perfectly ripe strawberries. It's enough to make a lucky Easter Egg think it had dyed and gone to heaven.

http://www.indiana.edu/~cbclass/HT/9-8-04%20Vinegar.htm