Sour Power

Boutique vinegars have all the character of fine wine

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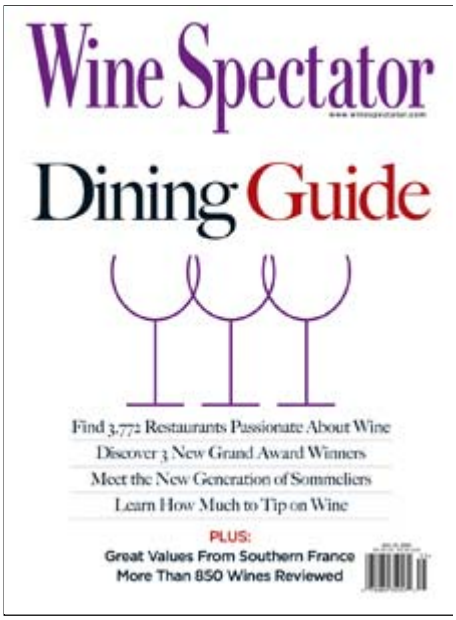

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Chefs around the country are turning to one of the oldest condiments in the pantry—vinegar—to boost existing flavors in dishes or to create new ones. But this isn't the jug white vinegar that doubles as window cleaner, or even better-quality wine vinegar. These are artisanal vinegars, such as Martin Pouret Chardonnay vinegar from France, Terre Bormane vinegars from Italy and Round Pound vinegars from the Napa Valley—vinegars that are made with the same care as boutique wines and carry price tags that rival those on high-end olive oils. A 200ml bottle of Minus 8 Ice Wine vinegar from Canada, for example, sells for $50.

Michael DiBianca, chef and owner of Moro restaurant in Wilmington, Del., adds a few drops of Minus 8 Ice Wine vinegar from Canada to a demiglace with fresh Bing cherries for a rack of lamb, to give the sauce a finishing touch. "The flavor is completely different from any vinegar out there," DiBianca says.

At Eclano restaurant in Boston, executive chef Dan DeCarpis puts a Round Pond vinegar in a pan sauce for seared duck breast. "We have an all-Italian wine list, so I liked the fact that it was made with Sangiovese and Nebbiolo," says DeCarpis of the vinegar, which also has Petit Verdot. "It has real, true flavor, which a lot of these mass-produced blends don't have."

High quality vinegars, including balsamics, have been around for some time, but according to John Magazino, import specialist for the Chefs' Warehouse in New York, "The popularity of varietal vinegars has really taken off in the last two years. Before that, you never saw Barolo or Banyuls vinegar. Chefs are looking for more specific flavors." Magazino brought in Terre Bormane vinegars from Italy for Alain Ducasse when the chef opened his New York restaurant. I used the Terre Bormane white balsamic vinegar to deglaze a pan after sautéing some scallops. My wife ended up wiping up the last of the sauce from the plate with her fingers.

Many artisanal vinegars are coming from France, Italy and Spain, some produced in quantities so small or from regions so obscure that they have only recently been unearthed. Even knowledgeable food professionals are just beginning to find them. "They were out there. I just had to discover them," says Ihsan Gurdal, owner of Formaggio Kitchen, based in Cambridge, Mass. "And the more I searched, the more I found."

Vinegar is created by two fermentations. As in winemaking, the first produces alcohol. A second fermentation is induced with bacteria, which multiply and create a raft of yeast cells, referred to as the "mother." The mother converts alcohol into acetic acid and water (the amount of acetic acid is listed on the label). Some of the mother is retained to create additional batches of vinegar.

Artisanal vinegar makers aim to produce alcohol of higher- than-average quality during that first fermentation. "It's just as if we said, 'Let's make good wine,'" says Ryan McDonnell, co-owner of Round Pond in Rutherford, Calif., which uses Napa Valley-grown grapes.

For the second fermentation, many artisanal wine vinegar producers, including Round Pond and Minus 8, use the French Orleans method. In this process, wine is poured into oak barrels—used ones, so that no wood flavors or tannins are imparted—to 60 percent capacity. The added air space, along with holes made in the barrel, allow for increased oxidation. After vinegar is produced, it is aged in these barrels, just like wine. "Normally, vinegar is made by putting wine into large vats and pumping oxygen in to get acetic acid, usually in 24 hours," McDonnell says. "The Orleans method is a very old, natural and organic way."

Minus 8, which ages its vinegar at least four years, uses the solera method, which is used for Spanish Sherry and Sherry vinegar. In this method, younger vinegars are mingled with older vinegars in a pyramid of barrels. The first Minus 8 was

aged from 1997 to 2001. Vinegar bottled this year will have some of that '97 vinegar.

Minus 8 has the kind of intense fruitiness, acid balance and long finish you'd expect from a good late-harvest Riesling. Indeed, Riesling is one of the nine grapes used to make it. Speaking of late-harvest, Kitchen Line in Napa makes an excellent Late Harvest Sauvignon Blanc vinegar that Bill Morris, executive chef of the Rainier Club in Seattle, uses to give fruitiness and acidity to dishes such as spring pea soup.

For white balsamic vinegar, the must, or grape juice, used for the vinegar is not caramelized, unlike the must for darker balsamics. This makes white balsamic appropriate to lighter preparations, such as seafood.

Acetoria, a producer in Alto Adige, Italy, makes a terrific trockenbeerenauslese vinegar with an acetic acid level low enough to qualify it as an after-dinner drink. I also liked Acetoria's viscous raspberry vinegar, bursting with ripe fruit.

Piedmont restaurateur Cesare Giaccone makes vinegars from native varieties such as Moscato, Arneis and Barolo. The Barolo and some reduced chicken stock made a fine sauce for pan-roasted duck breast. And a tablespoon of the Moscato in a glass of seltzer made a refreshing drink, as did some Spanish Unio Moscatel vinegar in seltzer.

As with wine, vinegars with the same varietal on their labels don't necessarily taste the same. For example, Charbay Napa Valley Live Cabernet vinegar (aged five years in French oak) is like a well-aged wine that has lost much of its primary fruit flavor, whereas the B.R. Cohn Cabernet vinegar from Sonoma, Calif., has bright, fresh fruit flavors and snappy acidity, and the Loxarel Cabernet Sauvignon vinegar from Spain (aged 20 years in American oak) tastes like a balsamic.

In pan sauces, artisanal wine vinegars can be used instead of—or in combination with—stock. Use stronger vinegars such as Barolo, Cabernet Sauvignon and Banyuls for meats, and lighter vinegars such as the Muscat, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc for chicken and fish. Vegetables, whether grilled or steamed, sing with a splash of vinegar, especially very fruity ones.

Tomato sauces perk up with vinegars like Acetoria's Essig Tomaten, and gravies with Sherry vinegar. Sherry producer Lustau makes a vinegar that has the quality of fine dry oloroso. Try vinegars such as Minus 8 and Acetoria raspberry in dessert sauces—you could even put them on ice cream. Artisanal vinegars are also great in condiments. Cave de L'Abbe Rous Banyuls vinegar (aged five years in oak) enlivened my cranberry chutney.

Of course, these vinegars are tailor-made for salads, but there's a difference: Many are so smooth that the usual ratio of three or four parts oil to one part vinegar can be reduced to two-to-one or one-to-one. I would also use milder, fruitier vinegars with milder oils, such as walnut oil; save the more robust vinegars for those assertive olive oils.

Ultimately, artisanal vinegars should be treated the same way as other artisanal products—in other words, the better the quality, the less you want to muck it up. As Morris puts it, "Use them like fleur de sel [salt], more with finishing than cooking, [so] the flavor can shine."

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