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New Labeling for Balsamic Vinegar

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Of all the foods that originate in Emilia Romagna, Italy—prosciutto, tortellini, lasagna, Parmesan cheese, Bolognese sauce, and more—the one we use perhaps the most often, salad eaters especially, is balsamic vinegar. Most balsamic vinegar comes from Modena, a town that was awarded the sole right to produce “Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” by the European Union in 2009. Modena’s balsamic vinegar makers are beginning to use a new labeling system designed to help shoppers choose the right vinegar. Depending on what you want, a \$5 balsamic vinegar might beat a fancy \$50 bottle.

Before we get into the simple labeling system, a brief overview of the complex balsamic vinegar world is needed. “Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” is the vinegar subject to the new labeling. Separate from the labeling are “Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” and “Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Reggio Emilia”—vinegars that, made in the ancient style and aged for twelve-plus years, sit on the top shelf at three-figure prices.

“Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” is a better option for a cook who wants a robust balsamic vinegar without breaking the bank. Typically, shoppers determine the quality of a vinegar by its age, but “Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” is usually blended from grapes that come from many harvests, making age a deceptive indicator.

The new labels are more straightforward. On them, between one and four grape leaves appear above a chef’s toque. Labels, each a different color, correspond to groups into which various “Balsamic Vinegar of Modena” bottles have been organized. Look for these balsamic vinegars at Target, Costco, and other grocery stores.

Here’s what the colors mean:

- **Bronze (one leaf):** “a zesty, lightly sweet balsamic vinegar, delicate in aroma and consistency, perfect in salad dressings and with fresh cheeses, and for other everyday uses.”
- **Silver (two leaves):** “A round, briskly flavored vinegar with a bit more body, delicious in marinades and BBQ sauces and for brightening the flavors of steamed vegetables and other lightly cooked foods.”
- **Gold (three leaves):** “Vinegar that is full-bodied, boldly aromatic and well-balanced, ideal for drizzling on roasted meats and grilled fish, into pasta sauces and in reduction sauces.”
- **Black (four leaves):** “A rich, sweet taste, a flavorful aroma and a syrupy consistency, perfect as a dressing on fresh fruits or aged cheeses, spooned over ice cream or for dramatically finishing any dish.”

The labeling system arose from a study conducted in part by the Italian Association of Balsamic Tasters. Need advice from our balsamic vinegar tasters? See how balsamic vinegars ranked when taste-tested in the Good Housekeeping Test Kitchen.

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