

# MODENA IN A BOTTLE

**A journey into the time-honoured art and taste  
of Modena's prized vinegar**

By Melody Wren

In the heart of Italy's Emilia-Romagna region lies Modena, a city revered for two culinary treasures: Parmigiano Reggiano and its world-renowned balsamic vinegar. Nestled between ancient traditions and modern refinement, Modena offers the perfect climate for producing authentic balsamic vinegar—a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages.

## ► UNDERSTANDING THE ESSENCE OF BALSAMIC

In Modena, two types of balsamic vinegar are celebrated: DOP (Denominazione di Origine Protetta) and IGP (Indicazione Geografica Protetta). IGP balsamic is typically aged for five years in a single barrel. Contrast that with the deeply rooted traditions of producing DOP balsamic, which is aged in multiple wooden barrels over decades. Every step in producing DOP balsamic is strictly governed by a local consortium that verifies its quality and authenticity—from the label to the bottle's shape.

The shape is relatively recent, dating from 1987, when renowned Italian automotive designer Giorgetto Giugiaro was commissioned by the Modena Chamber of Commerce to design a bottle that would reflect the product's heritage and quality. Giugiaro applied the imagination seen in lines of cars such as the DeLorean and the Volkswagen Golf to produce a unique bulbous shape and rectangular base now synonymous with traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena.



## ► A VISIT TO ACETAIA MALPIGHI

Our journey took us to Acetaia Malpighi, a fifth-generation balsamic producer, where we joined chef Stefano Corghi and his colleague Maria at Tenuta del Cigno. For several hours, chef Stefano immersed us in the rich tradition of balsamic making—an art passed down through the Malpighi family for over 200 years. Their five-hectare vineyard grows Lambrusco (red) and Trebbiano di Spagna (white) grapes, essential to their craft.

## ► FROM GRAPES TO GOLD

The process begins by crushing the grapes, seeds and stems into a paste called must and gently cooking the mixture with water for two days. As it condenses, the must transforms from pale to deep, dark brown. Remarkably, four litres of grape must yield just one litre of balsamic vinegar.

Only the cooked must becomes DOP balsamic, which is aged meticulously in barrels made of chestnut, juniper, cherry, or mulberry—each wood lending its own unique character. Over time, the vinegar is transferred from barrel to barrel, condensing and developing complexity. We saw barrels dating back to 1921, 1927 and 1955. The tops are never sealed—simply covered with a stone or cloth to allow essential oxygenation. These stones, worn smooth by decades of acidic condensation, are artifacts in themselves.

DOP balsamic is aged for at least 12 years, with extra-old reserves matured over 25 years. The result is a thick, rich vinegar that is not merely a condiment, but an ingredient in its own right. When I asked chef Stefano what balsamic was originally used for back in the 1920's, he described it as a family treasure passed down through generations. When a daughter was born, a new batch of balsamic was started and when she got married, that aged balsamic was gifted to the newlywed couple.



## ► GATHERING THE HARVEST

Our culinary adventure began in the “supermarket vineyard,” where we foraged chicory, dandelion, plantain and grape leaves to prepare a lunch of risotto. We learned to make risotto from scratch: toasting rice, stirring in a homemade broth made from our foraged greens (simmered for just twenty minutes with pumpkin and onion) and finally finishing it with butter, Parmigiano and a few precious drops of balsamic. As chef Stefano reminded us, “Balsamic is an ingredient, not a condiment. Use it only at the end—it must not be too hot, or it will lose its flavour.”



## ► THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE CRAFT

Massimo Malpighi, a pioneer in the industry, is recognized as the world’s foremost balsamic vinegar producer and the first official master taster. Earning this title requires ten years of study and passing five to six rigorous exams annually—with no room for error. Our culinary guide, chef Stefano, trained at the prestigious Serramazzoni culinary school near Modena. After working in Modena’s prisons and opening two restaurants, he now freelances as a private chef and consultant for wine startups. His deep connection to the land and reverence for tradition made our hands-on experience truly unforgettable.

As we admired the young white Trebbiano grapes—ideal for both Vin Santo and balsamic production—it was a vivid reminder of how deeply food, land and tradition intertwine in Modena.



## ► BEYOND THE BARREL

The Malpighi family also crafts a range of specialty vinegars—fig, truffle, rose (made with estate-grown flowers) and white mosto vinegar, which uses uncooked grape must that matures naturally in a single barrel. They also produce lavender and dandelion honey, showcasing the natural bounty of the region.

Their best-selling product—a 15-euro bottle of aceto balsamico—strikes the perfect balance between quality and accessibility. We took home a bottle of DOP vinegar (€46), first sampled with Parmigiano, then again over the homemade risotto. Later, strawberries marinated for just an hour in Malpighi’s own white vinegar were finished with drops of DOP balsamic—a revelation of flavour.



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