

Flavored Vinegars

Vinegars have been made and used to flavor food for thousands of years. In fact, traces of vinegar have been found in Egyptian urns dating back to 3,000 BCE. Vinegars are made by allowing bacteria called *Acetobacter aceti* to ferment diluted wine, ale, fruits or grains. This creates acetic acid, which gives the liquid a sour flavor. The vinegar we buy in the store is from 4-6 percent acetic acid and 94-96 percent water.

Flavored vinegars can add variety to your family's meals, and making them is a simple process. All you need are herbs, vinegars, juices, fruits, spices and sugar.

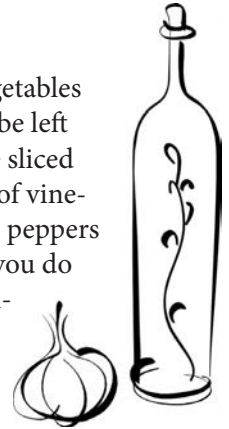
Vinegar is the base, so be sure to choose a high-quality, commercially produced vinegar. There are several types of vinegars available that will give you different flavors.

- **Distilled white vinegar** is clear in color and has a sharp, acidic taste by itself. It is the best choice for delicately flavored herbs.
- **Apple cider vinegar** has a milder taste than distilled white vinegar but the amber color may not be desirable. Apple cider vinegar blends best with fruits.
- **Wine and champagne vinegars** are generally more expensive than distilled and cider vinegars, but they are more delicate in flavor. White wine and champagne vinegars work well with delicate herbs and lighter-flavored fruits. Red wine vinegars would work well with spices and strong herbs like rosemary, but they will mask the flavor of most herbs.
- **Rice vinegar** is a mild, slightly sweet vinegar used occasionally for flavoring.

Be aware that wine and rice vinegars contain some protein, which provides an excellent medium for bacterial growth if not handled and stored properly. For added safety, use only commercially produced vinegars.

Favorite fruits for flavoring vinegars are raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, peaches, pears and the peel of lemons and oranges. Favored vegetables include garlic cloves, jalapeño or other peppers, and green onions. Many herbs, such as rosemary, thyme, basil and tarragon, are also used.

Thoroughly wash and dry all fruits, vegetables and herbs before use. Small fruits may be left whole or halved. Larger ones should be sliced or cubed. Allow 1 cup of fruit per pint of vinegar. Aromatic vegetables like garlic and peppers should be cut but left in large pieces if you do not want them to pour out with the vinegar during each use. They should also be used sparingly, based on your taste and the strength of the vegetable's flavor. Sprigs of fresh herbs—or dried herbs—can be used.



To make flavored vinegars, you'll need glass bowls or plastic food-safe containers, measuring cups and spoons, cheesecloth for straining, canning jars with two-piece lids and a boiling water canner.

If using glass jars or bottles, make sure they are free of cracks or nicks and can be sealed with corks, screw-on caps or two-piece canning lids. Lids should be non-corrosive metal, plastic or new, sterilized corks.

Begin the preparation with clean equipment and supplies. If using jars for the steeping, sterilize them by heating in boiling water for 10 minutes.

A simple herb vinegar can be easily made by putting 3-4 sprigs of herbs in a jar and pouring 2 cups of warm vinegar over them. The temperature of the vinegar should be just below boiling, about 190 degrees. If you are using dry herbs, use 3 tablespoons of dried herbs per pint. Let the vinegar steep for 3 to 4 weeks.

At the end of this time, strain the vinegar through cheesecloth and discard the herbs. The flavor has been extracted and the herbs may be unattractive at this point. You might want to put fresh herbs in the vinegar to give a hint of its flavoring as you bottle it for long-term storage.

When the herb vinegar is finished, it may be placed in sterilized jars with two-piece lids and processed in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes.

Edible flowers, such as nasturtium and chive blossoms, can also be used to flavor vinegars. For example, nastur-

tiums produce a peppery-flavored vinegar with a beautiful orange color. Simply fill a sterilized jar or bottle with blossoms and pour hot vinegar over them. Let sit undisturbed for 10 days to 4 weeks to develop flavor. Keep vinegars made with this method tightly covered in the refrigerator until all the vinegar is used.

Flavored vinegars take at least 10 days for most flavors to develop and about 3 to 4 weeks for the greatest flavor to be extracted. However, desired flavors are a matter of personal taste. Crushing, “bruising” or chopping fruits, herbs and vegetables before adding them to the vinegar can shorten the flavoring process by about a week or so. To check product development, place a few drops on a piece of bread and taste to evaluate flavoring. If it is too weak, leave it to steep longer. If the flavor is too strong, dilute with more of the foundation vinegar.

Because vinegars are highly acidic, mold rarely occurs, but make sure all equipment is clean before starting and keep the vinegar covered during the steeping period to keep mold spores from contaminating the product. If the flavored vinegar ever has mold on it or in it or shows signs of fermentation, such as bubbling, cloudiness or sliminess, throw it away without using any of it for any purpose.

Store flavored vinegars in a cool, dark place. Refrigerate for maximum retention of freshness and flavors. Date the bottles or jars when they are opened. If properly prepared, flavored vinegars should keep for up to 3 months in cool storage. Fruit vinegars in particular may start to brown and change flavor after that. Refrigeration may extend the quality for 6 to 8 months. Always keep vinegar bottles tightly sealed. After 6 months, taste the vinegar before using to make sure the flavor is still good.

Vinegars can be combined with a small amount of oil and used as salad dressings, in marinades and as a refreshing beverage when combined with club soda. Experiment with your favorite herbs and fruits to develop your own recipes, or try these favorites.

Herbal mix vinegar: For each pint of distilled white or wine vinegar, make a bouquet from three sprigs each of fresh parsley, rosemary and thyme. Lightly crush and place in jars. Pour almost-boiling vinegar over the top and allow to steep in a cool place for 3 to 4 weeks.

Lemon-dill-peppercorn vinegar: For each pint jar of distilled white vinegar, use the spiral peel (colored part only) of 1 lemon, 4 sprigs of fresh dill and ½ teaspoon whole black peppercorns. Place the fresh dill, peppercorns and lemon peel in a jar. Heat vinegar to 190 degrees and pour into jar. Let steep for 3 to 4 weeks. This is especially good in marinades for fresh seafood or in salad dressings. Variation: Use ¼ cup chopped fresh mint instead of the dill and peppercorns to add a mint flavor to fresh fruit.

Raspberry vinegar: Warm 6 cups white wine vinegar until it begins to give off steam. Put 1 pint of raspberries in a nonreactive container. Pour the warmed vinegar over berries and steep for one hour. Shake gently and cover. Steep for 4 days, shaking occasionally. Strain the berries out and transfer the vinegar to jars, flasks or bottles.

Blueberry basil vinegar: Combine 4 cups blueberries and 1 cup white wine vinegar in a glass bowl. Lightly crush blueberries and add 3 more cups of vinegar. Crush 1 cup basil and add to vinegar along with the zest from one lemon. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and let steep in a cool, dark place for 4 weeks, stirring every 2 or 3 days. Strain vinegar through several layers of cheesecloth.

Lingonberry orange vinegar: Combine 1 cup lingonberry juice and 1 cup sugar in a large saucepan. Heat over medium heat until all the sugar is dissolved. Add 3 cups white wine vinegar and ½ cup lingonberries. Add 2 sticks cinnamon and 4 whole cloves, tied in a spice bag. Bring the vinegar to a boil and reduce heat and simmer, covered, 10 minutes. Remove spice bag and place an orange slice in each jar. Ladle hot vinegar into jars and process in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes.

Resources

“So Easy To Preserve,” University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service, B 989

“Using Alaska’s Wild Berries and Other Wild Edibles,” University of Alaska Cooperative Extension Service, FNH-00120

“Flavored Vinegars,” Clemson Cooperative Extension Service, HGIC 3470

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