

Preserving Food: Flavored Vinegars

Vinegars garnished with sprigs of herbs or a layer of berries are a hot "splash" right now. They are favored by chefs for adding excitement to special dishes. Cooking at home is also enlivened by tantalizing tastes from the blending of flavors with vinegar. Flavored vinegars are easy and fairly safe to make at home, provided some simple precautions are followed.

Getting Ready

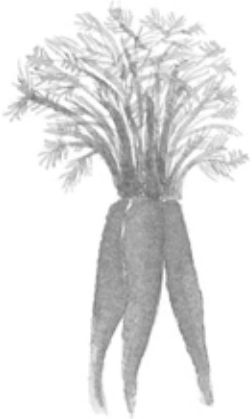
Jars and Bottles - Only glass containers are recommended for your flavored vinegars. Use glass jars or bottles that are free of cracks or nicks and can be sealed with corks, screw-band caps or two-piece canning lids. Wash containers thoroughly in warm, soapy water and rinse well. (A good bottle brush is a big help for narrow containers.) Then sterilize the clean, warm jars or bottles by completely immersing them in water and boiling for 10 minutes. Prepare the sterilizing bath before you wash the jars, or keep the clean jars in warm water until you are ready to put them in for sterilizing.

The best way to prevent breakage is to use a deep pot with a rack in the bottom, such as a boiling water canner. Fill the canner or pot at least half full with warm water. Place the empty, warm jars or bottles upright on the rack and make sure the water level is 1 to 2 inches above the tops of the jars. Bring the water bath to a boil, and continue boiling for 10 minutes. The jars should stay below the boiling water the entire time.

After 10 minutes of boiling, remove the jars or bottles from the water and invert on a clean towel. Use canning jar lifters or tongs that grab the containers without slipping. Fill the jars with your vinegar while they are still warm.

Lids and Caps - If using screw caps, wash in hot soapy water, rinse and scald in boiling water. (To scald, follow manufacturer's directions, or place caps in a saucepan of warm water, heat to just below boiling and then remove from the heat source. Leave caps in the hot water until ready to use.) Use non-corrodible metal or plastic screw caps. If using corks, select new, pre-sterilized corks. Use tongs to dip corks in and out of boiling water 3-4 times. Prepare two-piece metal home canning jar lids according to manufacturer's directions for canning. If using these lids, allow enough headspace between the lid and the vinegar so that there is no contact between them. Plastic storage screw caps that are made for canning jars are also now available and would work well for flavored vinegars.

Herbs - Allow 3 to 4 sprigs per pint (2 cups) of vinegar. Use very fresh herbs, picked before blossoming, for best flavor. It is best to pick fresh herbs soon after the morning dew has dried. Use only the best leaves or stems, discarding discolored, nibbled, crushed or dried out pieces. Wash the fresh herbs gently but thoroughly. Blot dry on clean paper towels. After herbs are washed and dried, dip them in a sanitizing bleach solution of 1 teaspoon of household chlorine bleach in 6 cups of water. Rinse thoroughly under cold water and pat dry with clean paper towels.



Dried herbs may be substituted if necessary; allow 3 tablespoons dried herbs per pint of vinegar.

Fruits, Vegetables and Spices - Favorite fruits for flavoring vinegars are usually raspberries, blackberries, strawberries, peaches, pears and the peel of lemons and oranges. Sometimes they are combined with herbs or spices such as mint or cinnamon. Other popular flavorings include peeled garlic cloves, jalapeno or other peppers, green onions, peppercorns or mustard seed.

Thoroughly wash all fruits and vegetables with clean water; peel if necessary before use. Small fruits and vegetables may be left whole or halved. Larger ones, such as peaches, may need to be sliced or cubed. Allow 1 to 2 cups of fruit per pint of vinegar, or the peel of one orange or lemon per pint of vinegar. Garlic cloves, peppers and chunks of firm fruit may be threaded on clean, thin bamboo skewers for easy insertion and removal.

Vinegar - Several types of vinegar may be used, but not all give the same results. 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 are more delicate in flavor. White wine and champagne vinegars work well with delicate herbs and lighter-flavored fruits. Red wine vinegar would work well with spices and strong herbs like rosemary, but 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 that provides an excellent medium for bacterial growth, if not handled and stored properly. For added safety, use only commercially produced vinegars.

Flavoring the Vinegar

Place the prepared herbs, fruits and/or spices in the sterilized jars. Avoid overpacking the jars; use 3 to 4 sprigs of fresh herbs, 3 tablespoons of dried herbs, 1 to 2 cups of fruit or vegetables, or the peel of one lemon or orange per pint of vinegar to be flavored. If using basil, 1/2 cup of coarsely chopped leaves may also be used.

Often it is preferred to "lightly bruise" mint leaves or the sprigs of fresh herbs to release the flavors and shorten

the flavoring process a little. If using dried bay leaves, leave whole for easy removal. A small slit may be cut in whole jalapeno peppers or peeled garlic cloves; wear plastic gloves when working with peppers.

Berries may also be "lightly bruised" as they are put in your container. When using orange or lemon peel, thinly cut off only the colored portion, avoiding the thick white underside. Try to cut the peel in a continuous or long spiral for easy removal later on.

Heat the vinegar to just below the boiling point, or at least 190-195° F. Pour over the flavoring ingredients in jars, leaving 1/4 inch headspace. Wipe rims of jars with a clean, damp cloth. Attach lids, corks or screw caps tightly. Let sit to cool undisturbed.

Store in a cool, dark place. Let sit undisturbed for 3 to 4 weeks to develop flavors.* Strain the vinegar through a damp cheesecloth or coffee filter one or more times until the vinegar shows no cloudiness. (Skewers of vegetables may be removed first.) Discard the fruit, vegetables and/or herbs.

Prepare jars and lids as before for final bottling steps. Pour the strained vinegar into clean sterilized jars and cap tightly. A few clean berries or a washed and sanitized sprig of fresh herb may be added to the jars before closing, if desired.

* A Note About Checking Flavors: It takes 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 jars can shorten the flavoring process by about a week or so. To test for flavor development, place a few drops of the vinegar on plain white bread and taste. If the flavor has developed to a pleasing point for you, strain the vinegar and continue as above. If flavors seem too strong after the standing time and straining, dilute the flavored vinegar with more of the base vinegar that was used in preparing the recipe.

Storing the Vinegar

Store the flavored vinegars in a cool, dark place. Refrigeration is best for retention of freshness and flavors. Date the bottles or jars when they are opened. If properly prepared and bottled, flavored vinegars should keep for up to 3 months in cool storage. Fruit vinegars in particular may start to brown and change flavor noticeably after that. Refrigeration of all flavored vinegars may extend the quality for 6 to 8 months. Always keep vinegar bottles tightly sealed. After six months, even if there is no sign of spoilage, taste the vinegar before using to make sure the flavor

is still good. If a flavored vinegar ever has mold on or in it, or signs of fermentation such as bubbling, cloudiness, or sliminess, throw it away without using any of the vinegar for any purpose.

Herbed and fruited vinegars are often displayed on sunny window sills and shelves as decorative room additions. If stored in this manner for more than a few weeks, these bottles should be considered as permanent decorations and not used in food preparation.

Significance of Safety Concerns

As long as clean and high-quality ingredients (vinegar and herbs, vegetables or fruits) are used, the greatest concern with homemade flavored vinegars should be mold or yeast and then having to throw out your product. If your flavored vinegar starts to mold at any time, or show signs of fermentation such as bubbling, cloudiness or sliminess, discard the product and do not use any of it that is left.

Some harmful bacteria may survive and even multiply slowly in some vinegars. It is important to follow directions carefully, store flavored vinegars in the refrigerator or cool places, and work in a very clean area with sanitary utensils. Also be sure hands are very clean while you work!

References:

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Suggested Flavorings

Herbal-Mix Vinegar

For each pint jar of distilled white or wine vinegar to be flavored, make a bouquet from 3 sprigs each of fresh parsley, rosemary and thyme. Lightly crush before placing in jars.

Fresh Tarragon Vinegar

For each pint jar of distilled white or white wine vinegar to be flavored, use 3 (3 inch) sprigs of fresh tarragon, or 1 cup of fresh tarragon leaves and stems. Lightly crush before placing in jars.

Variation: Also add 1/3 cup minced fresh chives to each pint of vinegar, along with the tarragon.

Lemon-Dill-Peppercorn Vinegar

For each pint jar of distilled white vinegar to be flavored, use the spiral peel (colored part only) of 1 lemon, 4 sprigs of fresh dill, and 1/2 teaspoon whole black peppercorns. (This is especially good in marinades for fresh seafoods or salad dressings.)

Spicy Parsley Vinegar

For each pint jar of distilled white vinegar to be flavored, use 3 to 4 sprigs of fresh parsley, 1/2 teaspoon whole mustard seeds, and 1/2 teaspoon whole allspice.

Raspberry Vinegar

Wash 2 cups fresh raspberries gently but thoroughly. Bruise slightly with the back of a spoon or by rolling gently in waxed paper. Place in a sterilized quart glass canning jar. Heat 3 cups of vinegar to just below the boiling point and pour over the raspberries. Cap tightly and allow to stand 2 to 3 weeks in a cool, dark place. Strain vinegar through damp cheesecloth and discard fruit. Pour vinegar into clean, sterilized glass jars or bottles. Seal tightly. Store in the refrigerator for best quality and flavor. (This is especially good in dressings for mixed greens or fruit.)

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