

Best Buy balsamic vinegar

Our experts put 21 balsamic vinegars to the test and found three great tasting options priced from £2.59 to £11.99

When it comes to buying balsamic vinegar, you tend to get what you pay for. However, our expert taste test of 21 vinegars has revealed that there's great bargains to be had.

The Co-operative's Truly Irresistible (78%) has been awarded Best Buy status, with our experts enjoying its versatility, 'fruity' taste and its natural sweetness. At £5.24 for 250ml, it is less than half the price of the other Best Buy, Sainsbury's Taste the Difference (84%), which costs £11.99 for the same sized bottle. This 'well aged', thicker and 'elegant' vinegar came top in our test. Our experts loved its strong aromas and caramel sweetness – recommending it for drizzling over parmesan or salads.

If you're looking for a bargain, Jamie Oliver's Balsamic scored well (66%) for its great value and unusual 'sherry-like flavour'. Versatile and cheap at £2.59, our experts agreed that this label's worth a look. They suggested using it to marinate meat before cooking and as a dip for fresh bread with olive oil. You can find Jamie's vinegar in Waitrose, where you could alternatively pick up a Waitrose Balsamic (64%) – though it's more expensive.

If you shop at Tesco, then its Finest Aged Balsamic Vinegar of Modena scored highly with 73%. This thicker vinegar was described as 'floral and woody with gentle acidity'. It's great for drizzling over fresh fruit, such as strawberries. If you live near an M&S, you could try its balsamic (68%), which has a natural fruit sweetness.

CHEAP SUPERMARKET VINEGAR

Our experts felt that cheaper supermarket vinegars are still not quite up to scratch, with many marked down for being too

thin or having high levels of acidity. The experts agreed, however, that you can get away with thinner vinegar when mixing it with oil and honey to make a dressing. You should also be able to bubble off any acidity when cooking.

While the highest scoring balsamic was by Sainsbury's, a cheaper Sainsbury's alternative scored a low 50%. At £1.79 for 250ml, this balsamic was described as too thin, 'lacking in character', and caused a slight 'burning at the back of the throat'.

Similarly, cheaper Asda, M&S, Tesco and Waitrose branded vinegars all scored lower than their pricer alternatives.

The Asda Aceto Balsamico di Modena scored the lowest in our test with 46%. Our experts described it as too thin, with high levels of acidity and little depth of flavour or sweetness. So at just £1 a bottle, this is one bargain that may be best avoided.

HOW WE TEST VINEGAR

We compared 21 balsamic vinegars in a blind taste test and rated them on three key factors – aroma, balance and taste. These individual ratings were used to calculate an overall score for each vinegar. We tested a range of widely available vinegar brands, as well as cheaper and pricier supermarket labels.

A good balsamic vinegar will have a balanced level of both acidity and natural sweetness. The vinegar should also have an aroma and complex flavours of wood – from the barrels it's aged in.

Our experts were: Charles Carey – oil and vinegar importer, The Oil Merchant; Jonathan Miller – food buyer, Fortnum & Mason; Mark Lewis – project manager and agent, Mark Lewis Food and Wine Ltd; Adam Byatt – chef and restaurateur.

EXPERT VIEW *Buy the best you can*

Charles Carey | oil and vinegar importer, The Oil Merchant



Balsamic vinegar originated in and around Modena, northern Italy. Traditionally, balsamic vinegars

are made from late harvested, locally grown grapes – usually the Trebbiano variety. The must (juice) is cooked and travels through a series of barrels, made of different woods. Over time, the must turns to vinegar, taking on complex aromas and a balanced taste of sweetness and acidity.

READING THE LABEL

When shopping, look for a label that says: Aceto Balsamico di Modena IGP, Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena DOP, or Condimento all'Aceto Balsamico di Modena IGP. If it doesn't have any IGP or DOP identifiers, leave it on the shelf. All of those tested by us were IGP, however.

A vinegar's back label will list the ingredients in volume order. If the first mention is 'wine vinegar' then expect a cheaper taste; caramel is often added to such vinegars to darken.

If the first ingredient is 'cooked must', then expect to pay more. Such vinegars are great when mixed with oil as a dressing, or dropped on to grilled meat or steamed vegetables.

THE COST

Finally, consider the cost. It's usually true that the most expensive vinegars are the best, but, as the Which? taste test shows, this isn't always the case. You won't use a bottle in a night though, so go for the best you can – you'll find reward in your investment.

All prices correct at the time we bought the products for testing (April, 2012). Prices for pictured vinegars were checked June



TELL US WHAT YOU THINK Do you think it's worth paying premium prices for balsamic vinegar? Or do those cheaper supermarket options hit the spot? To share your view, visit www.which.co.uk/balsamic

Sainsbury's Taste the Difference Aceto Balsamico di Modena 4 Leaf
 £11.99 for 250ml

BEST BUY

Which? test score 84%

Almost syrupy in texture, this dense, rich vinegar is well balanced, with a caramel sweetness and strong aromas of aged cedar wood. One expert commented: 'you can taste the age'. It would be ideal for drizzling on parmesan chunks and salads. A few drops would work well with a fruity olive oil in a vinaigrette, too.

The Co-operative Truly Irresistible Balsamic Vinegar of Modena £5.24 for 250ml

BEST BUY

Which? test score 78%

This 'gluggable' younger vinegar has a clean, fresh, slightly acidic but delicately balanced taste. It has a fruity aroma, with soured apple and woody tones. It has a natural grape sweetness as well as honeyed nut and dark cherry flavours. This is a great versatile choice, being good for dipping bread, cooking and dressing salads.

Jamie Oliver Balsamic Vinegar of Modena
 £2.59 for 250ml

WORTH A LOOK

Which? test score 66%

The cheap price tag and the great taste makes this high scorer worth a look. Our experts agreed it stood out from the crowd with its thick, intensely coloured, unusual flavour and its balance between fairly high acidity and an almost molasses sweetness. The flavours lack a little depth, but its great with salads and dipping bread.



ALSO TESTED

- 73%** Tesco Finest Aged Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £8.99
- 70%** Monari Ampola Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £4.99
- 68%** M&S Balsamic Vinegar Modena 5, £9.99
- 64%** Waitrose Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £14.99
- 64%** Tesco Ingredients Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £1.79
- 63%** Simonini Organic Aceto Balsamico di Modena, £2.79
- 63%** Belazu Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £9.74
- 62%** Carlo Magno Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £0.99
- 60%** Essential Waitrose Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £1.79
- 57%** Asda Extra Special Aceto Balsamico di Modena, £4.00
- 57%** M&S Balsamic Vinegar of Modena 3, £1.65
- 54%** Acetum Aceto Balsamico di Modena 4 leaf, £9.99
- 53%** Trattoria Verdi Balsamic Vinegar of Modena, £0.99
- 52%** Lidl's Acentino Acero Balsamico di Modena, £0.99*
- 51%** Rocca di Vignola Aceto Balsamico di Modena, £1.09
- 50%** Sainsbury's Aceto Balsamico di Modena, £1.79
- 48%** Ponti Aceto Balsamico di Modena, £2.49
- 46%** Asda Aceto Balsamico di Modena, £1.00

*500ml. All other prices for 250ml.