



(L-R) Sisters Cristina and Silvia Crotti

# ITALY'S NECTAR

*For the Crotti family in the province of Reggio Emilia, crafting traditional balsamic vinegar is a family affair*

**T**he Italian region of Emilia-Romagna is home to some of the country's most well-loved foods. Think of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, the popular prosciutto cured meat and, of course, balsamic vinegar. While diners associate Parma with its specialty hams and cheese, Modena is the city that comes to mind when balsamic vinegar is brought up in conversation. Yet this prized condiment's origins are actually linked to another place in Italy, the next-door province of Reggio Emilia, and one family is determined to spread the word.

For Cristina Crotti, who runs vinegar producer Il Borgo del Balsamico with her sister, the campaign to give the Reggio Emilia area its fair share of the spotlight is an uphill struggle. Rival Modena draws more attention given it is home to Maserati and Ferrari, while in gastronomic circles it has attracted interest thanks to Osteria Francescana, the three-starred Michelin restaurant run by Massimo Bottura, who also produces a line of aged balsamic vinegars.

Still, the Crottis are confident that once enough gourmands get a taste of the black elixir concocted at their family's estate in the countryside of Reggio Emilia, the monopoly Modena holds

over balsamic vinegar will be broken. On a tour of the 18th-century manor house that Crottis calls home, she brings up the story of Matilde of Canossa, a local countess whose family in 1046 gifted a bottle of special vinegar that "flowed in a perfect manner" to visiting Holy Roman Emperor Henry III, an event that marks the first ever reference to the black-brown dressing.

In the ensuing millennium, locals regularly produced the vinegar for their own consumption. In Modena nobles from the House of Este began raising awareness in the 16th century by serving the condiment at court. Producers in Reggio Emilia have been playing catch up ever since and only recently formed a consortium thanks to Crotti's father, Renzo, who in 1971 sold the family's high-end fashion business to dedicate his energies to making top-quality balsamic vinegar. "It's a passion he passed down to us from an early age," explains Crotti.

The process of crafting this coveted vinegar rewards those who are patient: the liquid must be aged a minimum of 12 years to be declared balsamic vinegar. Other guidelines include using only locally harvested grapes. Much of Crotti's production relies on the trebbiano varietal. Grapes are harvested late to

give them enough time to naturally produce a high amount of sugar. They are then processed into a must by de-stemming and crushing the grapes to release the juice and sugars. Once the skins and pulp have been filtered out, the must is slowly cooked down in vats over low heat for several hours. Then the process of fermentation, acetification and aging begins.

Whereas wine ages in a dark cellar at a constant cool temperature, balsamic vinegar requires the opposite. Sticking to tradition, Crotti stores vinegar in wooden barrels in her attic so the vinegar is influenced by the seasons. “In summer, the heat is ideal for the microorganisms to spawn and convert the sugars to acid, and it helps the product breathe,” she explains. “In winter, the acetification and evaporation slows and the balsamic is given a chance to collect the flavours from the different wooden barrels. One has to remember that the product is alive and every day it changes its composition.”

A key component is the wood used to store the aging vinegar. Rules stipulate that only certain types of wood may be used, which include chestnut, cherry and juniper. Each type of wood imparts special notes: tannin-rich chestnut enhances the vinegar’s dark colour; cherry wood sweetens its flavour; and juniper intensifies its aroma. “The rule is that older wooden

barrels – we have some that date back a few centuries – yield better-tasting vinegars.”

Crotti ages her vinegar using the solera method, which means the liquid is moved from a large barrel into smaller casks after a designated amount of time. Finally, balsamic vinegar from recent harvests is blended with older vinegar. The end result is a delicious, syrupy liquid with a complex character. Crotti bottles the vinegar, which costs around \$150 a pop, only after a minimum of 25 years. “I describe it as a tailoring process,” she says. “Each bottle will have a distinctive flavour.”

To differentiate themselves from other artisanal producers and supermarket balsamic vinegar, which is made after only a few months and with added colouring, the Crottis use attractive packaging that draws inspiration from the world of perfume. In addition to selling at gourmet delis and food halls across Europe, they work with chefs in Italy and the UAE to find recipes to pair foods, such as foie gras, sushi and gelato, with their aged varieties. What’s more, this spring they opened a small bed and breakfast on their property to host those eager to learn more about their precious nectar. The investment, Crotti says, was a no-brainer. “We need to get the message out. After all, we have a long tradition to uphold.”



The Crotti family produces Il Borgo del Balsamico high-end balsamic vinegar on their estate in Reggio Emilia, Italy