It was through an Italian friend, Carlo Cipolla, that I first learned about balsamic vinegar. An eminent economic historian, Carlo had an appointment with his publisher in Bologna, a town famous for its cooking. Since he knew that my husband and I shared his enthusiasm for all things gastronomic, the prospect of a good Bolognese meal prompted him to invite us to accompany him and his wife. Before the visit to the publishers was over, these generous and hospitable people insisted on treating us all to dinner. The restaurant they suggested was Silverio, a fine place on the Via Nosadella, and new to us. The evening turned out to be memorable.

We ate figs stuffed with a mixture of soft cheese and prosciutto, and bresaola, thinly sliced dried beef, atop cucumbers dressed with oil and lemon juice. Next came large envelopes of pasta filled with a mixture of ricotta, egg, Parmesan, and enough béchamel to bind them, the whole topped with spears of asparagus and a dusting of cheese grated at the table. The main course was a medallion of veal, lightly dusted in flour and sautéed nutty brown in butter with onion greens, then simmering until the juices were thick and syrupy. Along with this we were drinking a straw-yellow Collio Sauvignon and then, with the veal, a grand, intensely ruby Vignarey Barbera from Angelo Gaja.

The cheese course featured regional products: a finely grained Parmigiano Reggiano, an almost spreadable Robiola, and from the Colli Bolognesi, the hills of the province of Bologna, a Pecorino Dolce made from ewe’s milk. They were, of course, in peak condition, and perfect following the veal. Along with this we were drinking a straw-yellow Collio Sauvignon and then, with the veal, a grand, intensely ruby Vignarey Barbera from Angelo Gaja.

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We had many questions about the history of balsamic vinegar, but documented facts, it turns out, are few, although legends and suppositions abound. In preparation for our visit, we looked up as much information as we could find. There were abundant references to the long history of ordinary vinegar, widely and variously used in many parts of the world as a medicant, disinfectant, preservative, foodstuff, and even in the practice of alchemy. In the 1650s it was sometimes prescribed to counter the effects of the plague.
In the eighteenth century the great Modenese scholar and priest, Ludovico Antonio Muratori, in a treatise entitled “Del governo della peste e delle maniere di guardasene” (“On the governing of the pestilence and some manners of guarding against it”), attributed the same powers to balsamic vinegar, supplying several remedies based on it.

There is a mention, in the official Gazette of the Italian government, of documents and manuscripts from the sixteenth century and also from the year 1796 that refer to the well-matured grape must used in the production of vinegar made in the style of Modena. In the same section of the Gazette is a notation of thirty-six barrels, presumably used for vinegar, supported on a rack kept in the third tower of the ducal palace. Most historians agree that the first recorded use of the term “balsamic vinegar” was in 1747, in a secret inventory of wine from the private cellars of the Duke of Este, who ruled over Modena at that time.

There are some early accounts about “special” vinegars from the Modena area being used as gifts to VIPs, most often royal ones. However, according to the various reports, none of them seems to have been made in the complex formula that yields balsamic. But they may have been precursors. At least, in one written account from the sixteenth century that describes the process of making such a vinegar, there were rudimentary similarities: grape juice, first warmed by the immersion of a hot brick, then aged in wooden barrels, resulted in a “special” vinegar.

By way of actual documentation, there are two letters, written in 1862 (though some documents say 1860) and in 1863 by a Modenese attorney, Francesco Aggazzotti del Colombaro, setting forth the precise formula for making aceto balsamico. The first of the two recipients was Pio Fabriani, a resident of Spilamberto, which attests to the fact that people in that area were passing around the recipe at least by the early 1860s. Aggazzotti’s directions included two pages of precise handwritten instructions down to such details as covering the barrel opening with a piece of cloth to repel flies and wasps, a custom still in use today. Among the instructions were directions for simmering the pressed grape juice before fermenting it until it had been slowly reduced to half, thereby intensifying the sweetness in the syrupy liquid. Called saba, the cooked must of grapes had long been an important ingredient in the culinary preparations of the region. In fact, there are references to the Counts of Salimbeni of Nonantola, a town seven miles to the north of Modena, having used it in the early 1700s (but whether for vinegar making or cooking, is not clear). The history of the area shows that there was, indeed, good vinegar there long before that. The site of a Benedictine monastery in the eighth century, Nonantola was ruled by the beginning of the eleventh by Bonifacio of Tuscany, then by his daughter Mathilde. One of the resident monks named Donizone, writing a chronicle of Mathilde’s life, mentioned an excellent vinegar made by Bonifacio in the Castle of Canossa in 1046, a barrel of which was given to Enrico II. The place of France. Clearly that area had an early penchant for aceticification.

Part of the lore suggests that it might have been a batch of saba intended for cooking, that somehow put aside and forgotten, had fermented and become the original base of balsamic vinegar. The tale persists, but so also do its debunkers. Only recently I read in Slow Food, a book by Giorgio Triani, a convincing argument that cooked grape juice, which must often have fermented inadvertently in various areas of Italy, never elsewhere resulted in the complex Modena formula of making balsamic vinegar. Why, for example, would a batch of fermented grape juice lead to such steps as simmering the must for a couple of days outdoors and aging it for years in a progression of barrels? It seems that fermented saba could not have been the culprit behind its beginnings. Another questionable theory on the origins of balsamic is the climate in the zone of Modena, hot summers and cold winters that prove ideal for the production of balsamic vinegar. But since this phenomenon occurs in a much wider geographical area, weather, likewise, could not have been the causal factor behind the regional invention.

I have seen a reproduction of a medieval picture of vinegar making in a book by Renato Bergonzini, an authority on balsamic vinegar, that clearly depicts the first step in the special process peculiar to Modena. In full color, it illustrates an herbarium of the Middle Ages. Two figures,
clad in garments appropriate to the times, attend to the
cooking of a caldron of must, or so the caption identifies it,
which is suspended over an open fire. The turreted fireplace
is distinctly of stone or brick and clearly in the out-of-doors.
One man is fiddling with the fire with a long splayed tool,
perhaps putting another log on it. The other, just behind
him, is emptying liquid from a small barrel. Although he is
using a large pitcher to collect it, another vessel sits on the
ground to receive it, a ceramic container strangely resembling,
both in its shape and its size, the earthenware storage jugs
currently in use in the vinegaries, or acetaie, of Modena.
Perhaps the scene shows the making of saba, and the vessels
now used for vinegar were first used in the Middle Ages to
store the cooking condiment. No one will ever know.

One thing is certain: the true balsamic vinegar, aceto
balsamico tradizionale, whatever its origins, has always been
confined to the geographic area of Modena and was until
recently more or less an artisanal product, made in relatively
small batches, used for family consumption, and—for the
most precious and aged vinegars—given as gifts to important
people. The lack of any mention of it by prestigious Italian
chefs or in prominent Italian cookbooks until the 1980s bol-
sters this idea. In the early 1960s, I had strawberries doused
with balsamic and sugar in Al Moro, a restaurant in Rome.
The recipe that they gave me specified only “vinegar,” not
balsamic. Since the eighties, when the traditionally-made
vinegar became recognized as a very special thing, so-called
balsamic vinegar has been used by cooks the world over,
but most of it is not the painstakingly-made product. In the
mid-sixties, the Minister of Agriculture set official guidelines
for a lesser product known as Balsamic Vinegar of Modena,
lacking the word “tradizionale.” This resulted in an enor-
mous increase of production and the creation of a huge
market for export. These days even a few entrepreneurs in
California are making the vinegar, mostly using the tradi-
tional method, but they can’t label it “from Modena.”

With a somewhat better, if still limited, idea of the his-
tory of balsamic vinegar, one Sunday in June, a week or so
before the actual competition, we set off for Spilamberto along with Carlo and his wife Ora. We figured we would be able to learn more and to ask more questions about the history before everyone was caught up in the throes of the contest. The town, not far from Modena and about twice that distance from Bologna, has a population of about eleven thousand and, among other things, is the source of the original recipe for a liqueur made from the green skins of walnuts, nowadays also produced elsewhere, but in those parts still called by its original name, nocino Modenese. Traditionally, the women pick the still-green walnuts right before the palio, where, in between the vinegars, bottles made in previous years are for sale.

We entered Spilamberto through a medieval archway below a fourteenth-century brick clock tower crowned with majestic crenellations. They knew how to build turrets in the Middle Ages. It was early afternoon, just after most people had finished their major meal of the day, and the piazza was filled with leisurely strollers engaged in the customary passeggiata.

We followed Carlo up the steps to the vinegar depository. The door was locked and no one responded to our knocks. Obviously it was closed on Sunday afternoon. But to Carlo that was only a temporary obstacle. We quickly descended behind him and went into the piazza full of walkers, where he spotted his friend the mayor. After Carlo’s brief introductions and explanations, the mayor went into action. It seems that the tailor had the key. If we hopped in our car and followed him on his bicycle, he would lead us to the tailor’s house, where all would be set right instantly. So off we went to the outskirts of the village, and following the mayor’s lead, parked in front of a modest one-story house.

The tailor and his family, just finishing their Sunday repast, graciously welcomed us all. After a few explanatory words from the mayor, the tailor sought out his key, got out his bicycle, and became our official guide. Back to the center of town we went, two bicycles and one car in procession, back up the stairs, key turned in lock, and suddenly before us, set out on tables, were a thousand small glass containers, mini flasks with bulbous bottoms, half full of dark brown, velvet balsamic vinegar, all of them contestants in the annual competition.

The tailor explained the process. Normal vinegar is sour wine (the French word for vinegar, vin aigre, means just that). Anyone who has kept an unfinished open bottle of wine knows that, after a short period of time, some of the bacteria, the acetobacters, once exposed to oxygen, convert ethanol alcohol into acetic acid, i.e. vinegar, from which the Italians derive their name for it, aceto. Balsamic vinegar, aceto balsamico, is another thing entirely.

It starts with the must of gently pressed grapes and skins, most usually made from overripe white trebbiano grapes, although several other varietals grown in the region are allowed. First boiled slowly until it becomes concentrated into saba, the same syrupy liquid that has long been used in cooking, it lends the finished vinegar its sweetness. Then an infusion of regular vinegar starts a fermentation process in the boiled-down must, after which it is mellowed and aged a minimum of twelve years (but sometimes more than a hundred; legend has it that in the case of the ducal family of Este, who had ruled over the Modena area since the 1500s, for as much as 360 years). The process takes place in a batteria, usually five to seven barrels—sometimes as many as ten—of different woods and sizes. Some barrels have been in the same family for generations. Fermentation takes place in the largest cask, many times started first in a wooden container; aging goes on in the small ones, and mellowing in the sizes in between. No barrel is ever completely filled. Each winter, a small quantity of finished vinegar, possibly no more than half the barrel or enough for one family’s yearly supply—about a gallon and a half—is drawn from the smallest keg, which is then replenished by an amount from the next keg, and so on down the line, somewhat like the solera process in making sherry. The last cask gets its deficit replenished with the new must. The different woods—mulberry, chestnut, English oak, juniper, cherry, and in more recent times, ash, acacia, or locust—each impart a different characteristic to the flavor. Evaporation concentrates the vinegar, adding to its viscosity and density. Traditionally the opening, many times rectangular, is covered by a square of cloth often held down by a metal grid or wooden block. This keeps the bugs out while allowing the contents to breathe and intensify. The barrels are traditionally kept in the attic where, during the summer, the temperatures are high and the atmosphere dry, both of which are needed for the fermentation to proceed. The colder temperatures of winter slow the process and allow the vinegars to clarify.

The Consorzio Produttori di Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale, founded by the late Rolando Simonini in 1967, is the official body that authenticates traditional balsamic vinegar (according to the government’s edict), enforces the strict rules for making it, runs the training program for the tasters, and conducts the annual palio. The grapes used must only be of specified varietals. The reduction, cooked over a fire outdoors and slowly simmered for almost two days, must reduce the original pressing to half. The aging must take place in different wooden barrels of decreasing capacity. The minimum aging must be for at least twelve years. Those that are
aged for twenty-five years or more can be labeled extra vecchio. Preservatives or sugars are a no-no. And the vinegar must be made within a geographically defined area of Emilia-Romagna, specifically in Modena or Reggio, the limited regions that were once the Este Duchy of Modena.

The labeling of balsamic vinegars is confusing. The real thing has a Denominazione di Origine Controllata (doc) certification, must come from the designated area of Modena, and must be made in the traditional style. The labels usually say Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale and the vinegars cost a good deal—the really old ones well over one hundred dollars a bottle. Vinegars that say Aceto Balsamico di Modena are made in the traditional way from boiled-down must, but may have caramel added to enhance the flavor, as well as a small amount of aged vinegar, which allows the label to proclaim six or eight or ten years of age, although the bulk of it may have aged for less than a year. These can be comparatively inexpensive to moderately expensive and are made in large part for commercial sale. Vinegars labeled simply Balsamic Vinegar can be made from any grape, have added sugar, have no barrel age, be made by a process that is not traditional, and indeed come from any region at all. They are usually bargains but do not resemble the real thing.

When the tailor had done with his explanations, interrupted by our frequent questions, it was time to sample the vinegars. He picked out several for us to taste that would best show the differences in flavor, viscosity, and the balance of sweetness to acidity. Although they varied, each was an excellent example of a true balsamic. We wanted to know what would happen to all these samples after the judging took place. He explained that the best were mixed together and then poured into small bottles—I would guess they held no more than two or three ounces—corked, sealed with red wax, and labeled with various identifications: Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena, Consorzio di Spilamberto Produtori, Festa S. Giovanni Spilamberto. Then they were packaged in small cardboard boxes and offered for sale. How wonderful! But where could we buy them? From him, of course. It turned out that the repository of bottles was in the back of his tailor shop, which was in his home, and since he was a member of the producers, the Consorzio di Spilamberto, he could sell them to us directly.

Back to the shop we went, first he on his bicycle and we following in the Fiat. Between the Cipollas and ourselves we bought several bottles. Pleased with our purchases and the delightful afternoon, we realized that it was late, in fact evening was setting in, and we were getting hungry. It was time to make our reluctant departure. As we drove out of town, we shortly passed Vignola, a village known for the quality of its cherries and plums. The first cherries of the season, bursting with purple juices, were already for sale at stands bordering the road. We couldn’t resist, especially Carlo, who was a cherry lover supreme. Although he shared with us liberally, we realized that, in a flick, Carlo had inadvertently consumed the greater part of the kilo we had bought—two pounds plus.

Somewhat later, in the piazza of one of the villages down the road, we stopped for what we expected to be a modest dinner—those cherries hadn’t made a dent—in a humble trattoria. The cooking was indeed home-style but had sophisticated nuances that took it one step beyond. It was utterly delicious: a little ham from Modena with some olives and country bread to accompany it, agnolotti stuffed with pancetta, ricotta, and Parmesan, splashed with a thick, garlicky tomato reduction, and served up in a deep bowl to capture the sauce; and then some local duck that had been roasted simply with aromatics and herbs until it was succulent, brown, and tender. Of course there were cherries from Vignola afterwards and ethereal little cookies that had come from Spilamberto, different from the usual amaretti found elsewhere in Italy. These had a predominant flavor of almonds and honey combined with the usual anise flavor, and used beaten egg whites to give lightness and lift.

Several years later we returned to Spilamberto, without Ora and Carlo this time. As we approached the clock tower, we noticed what we had not been aware of before: colorful plantings—a mixture of roses, begonias, gazania, and juniper bushes—and a statue dedicated to the Spilamberto members of the military who had served against the Nazi oppression between 1943 and 1945. Once inside the archway, we were at the beginning of the long street that leads to the Rangoni castle. The noble family has been connected to the town at least from the mid-fourteenth century. One of the women, Bianca Rangoni, is particularly remembered because of a silk mill that she had built early in the 1600s, which remained a source of employment for the townspeople until after World War II.

Now the town has all the usual shops, including Armani and Missoni boutiques, a bakery, a pastry shop, a store that sells fruit and vegetables, one that sells perfume, a place that sells beer, two or three cafés. It was to one of these that we went for lunch while we waited for the reopening of the Villa Comunale Fabriani, the municipal building that is now also the headquarters of the Consorzio dell’Aceto Balsamico di Spilamberto. We sat on the terrace at a table, one of four or five, covered with a red crocheted tablecloth anchored by a red elastic band that kept it from blowing off. The terrace,
surrounded by vines in planter boxes, was mercifully shaded by a red awning, and we enjoyed our simple lunch.

When we went back to the Villa, we were welcomed by Sig. Vecchi of the Consorteria, who gave us a detailed and lengthy tour of the premises. In this new location there was room for tasting tables, and in the attic there was an actual acetia for making vinegar. Two groups had their barrels there: one representing the township, the other the cooperative belonging to the Consorteria. The latter group also conducts training courses in tasting balsamic vinegars, using sixteen different samples in a series of twelve lessons. To run things there are various ranks of directors and community representatives, and even gli alfieri, or appointed officers, assigned each year to collect the samples of balsamic vinegar for judging at the palio. The wide membership of the consortium is divided, according to their experience, into apprentice tasters who are just learning, allievi assaggiatori; accomplished tasters, assaggiatori; and the true master tasters, maestri assaggiatori, who are only certified after passing the nine-year course.

The tasting, except during the yearly contest, is done in small groups seated at tables centered by a candle in a tall brass holder, a help in judging the density, color, and clarity. During the palio, there are seven tasters per table. The small bulbous flasks that we saw on our first visit are still the vessel of choice for the specimens of vinegar, and small spoons are still the way to taste them. On each table there is also a wicker basket of crostini to aid in clearing the palate.

Over the years the Consorteria has developed and refined an official tasting form. Besides the identity and signature of the taster, the table number, and the date, it includes the specific categories to be judged, as well as the maximum number of points that each can score. These are divided into visual values; olfactory qualities, such as finesse, acidity, and intensity; and taste factors, such as flavor, harmony, and fullness. These broad categories are further divided into such components as syrupy, mature, well-balanced, robust, and exquisite (for flavor) on the positive side, and four lesser rankings, each with successively fewer points, going all the way down to such disagreeable faults as inconsistent, turbid, lacking, unpleasant, weak, pungent, or absent altogether. There is also room for a line or two of written observations. This is serious business.

The attic where the vinegar is made is a large painted room whose pitched roof is lined with massive wooden beams. Ranks of barrels on wooden platforms extend from the sides and line some of the walls. The floor is homely cobbled, there are several chairs and a tasting table or two, and on the wall, besides shelves containing various implements and ceramic vinegar crocks, there is a cabinet containing bottles of vinegars combined after the tasting.

The glass containers for sale had changed somewhat since our last visit, now holding more like four ounces in a bottle of a slightly more modern shape, pasted with amplified labels showing that this is documented, extra-old, traditional balsamic vinegar of Modena. In fact, the official government decree now specifies exactly what the container should look like, insuring the preservation of the quality—and incidentally the prestige—of the product inside. The uniform bottle must be used for the traditional vinegars put up by the official consorterie of the area, the major one in Spilamberto, and two lesser, and later, groups from Modena and Reggio Emilia. It must be spherical in shape, of white clear glass, with a rectangular solid glass base. The labels show which town the vinegar came from and differ slightly in other details, such as logos and colors. The red wax is no longer a part of the packaging, but now you don’t need to go all the way to the tailor’s shop to buy a stash. You can get it directly from the Consorteria di Spilamberto, attested to in three different places on two separate labels, which is what we did. It is so good that our only problem is to make it last until the next visit.