



Sex-soaked hamburger

OF THE WEEK

In a new commercial for Carl's Jr., Padma Lakshmi is pictured eating a cheeseburger. Well, that's not entirely accurate: According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Top Chef* host and Salman Rushdie ex is depicted "cramming the giant burger into her educated maw and sucking barbecue sauce from her fingers and wrists. Let's not mince onions here: This is sex with a burger." Writer Dan Neil hypothesizes that this sort of racy commercial — made by the same people behind the 2005 Paris Hilton car wash ad — is the new face of junk-food advertising. "Fast-food ad-

vertisers know their products are singularly, dangerously unsexy," he writes. "Quiznos' Tuna Melt (large), at 2,090 calories, was just voted Worst Sandwich in America by *Men's Health*. If you eat a lot of those, you'll get fat and smell strange, and nobody will want to have sex with you." Thus we have lusty ladies binging on empty calories for the same reason cowboys smoked cigarettes: "These products have definite, measurable health consequences, and it's the job of the advertising's imagery to push these consequences as far offstage as possible." *Weekend Post*

SHELF LIFE

It's a blessing in dressing

A good balsamic vinegar is hard to beat — but can it be found for less than \$20? Our panel puckers up

By A. BROUWER AND A. WILSON

About the recession thing — Shelf Life could be doing better. We weren't frugal. We're the squirrels who didn't save our nuts, the hares that pelted past the tortoise, the — to continue the animal metaphor — doggy bags that were never used. Why didn't we foresee that the good times would never last? Couldn't we have saved and planned for the future? But no, we were too busy living it up: splashing where we should have been conserving; guzzling when we should have been drizzling; and, frankly, dressing (the salad) to impress. And now Shelf Life's last drop of high-end balsamic vinegar has left the building.

To add insult to injury, we realize that our chances of sampling the truly ravishing stuff are close to zero. Authentic, artisanal *tradizione* Italian balsamic vinegar — which most people, even gourmets, rarely encounter — can command \$500 for a 3.5-oz bottle because of its relative scarcity and unparalleled effect on the palate. For the connoisseur, a very fine board-certified, specially bottled, barrel-aged Aceto Balsamico made from Trebbiano grapes from the regions of Modena and Reggio-Emilia can be spoken of in the same breath as diamonds, or racehorses, or frescoes, because this exquisite elixir is a distillation of both natural processes and human craftsmanship. *Tradizione* balsamic vinegar is the stuff of legend and, for most of us, it remains, literally, on the other side of the world.

With the familiar, more accessible products — i.e. the non-*tradizione* brands — the quality can range from deeply sketchy to absolutely heavenly, and the prices, from \$2.99 to just under \$100. It doesn't help that in North America any old vinegar can call itself "balsamic," and that many brands dress themselves in bogus, official-looking bling to try and convey certification. But a reasonable balsamic vinegar will display three key characteristics: The flavour and texture will have dimension and presence; the list of ingredients will probably not feature additives such as caramel and colouring; and the bottle will give an indication of origin (the more precise the location, the better the product).

Shelf Life, currently peering out through the bars of the poorhouse, has set ourselves a budget-friendly task. Can a bottle of balsamic vinegar in the \$10 to \$25 range bring back that familiar magic? Could it, just maybe, taste like a million bucks?

Readying their vocabularies with such cask-conscious terms as fragrant, tart, velvety, raisiny, smoky, oaky, floral, crisp, rough, full-bodied, honeyed, and earthy are this week's expert judges: **Rodney Bowers**, executive chef and owner of Citizen and Rosebud restaurants; sommelier **Anton Potvin**, owner of The Niagara Street Café; and writer-director and food curator **Gail Singer**, all in Toronto. Space limitations prevent us from evaluating every brand in a given category; entries reflect the luck of the draw. Items are blind taste-tested and awarded between zero and five stars.

Weekend Post



PRODUCTS

RODNEY

ANTON

GAIL

ELSA BALSAMIC VINEGAR OF MODENA 250ML \$17.99
Available at specialty and fine food stores

I'm interested in the smell of Brand 1, you get something like a hint of malt. Otherwise, it's thin, with little viscosity and a sweet fruity taste. It was born to be used in a salad dressing. ★★

I kinda like it, but I have a feeling it's not going to stand out in the crowd. To me, it's fruity and figgish with a bit of wood. There's something sharp in the smell, like Rodney was saying, but I'm thinking: clove? ★★½

My first impressions are that it looks like motor oil and tastes like sweet berry vinegar, maybe blackberry. In the low-priced products, the sweetness can feel artificial, but, in a fine vinegar, it feels like part of the structure. ★★

6½ stars

ACETAIA BELLEI ACETO BALSAMICO DI MODENA 250ML \$25.99
Available at specialty and fine food stores; bellei.it/balsamico_ita.html

Remember when Terroni served balsamic and olive oil together, that \$14 or \$15 dollar thing? This reminds me of that. The texture is thin and smooth and I smell spicy anise and truffle. Tongue-smackingly well balanced. ★★½

You know that mountain wine, gluvine? Brand 2 reminds me of that. Like a hot sangria for the chalet. It's spicy and dark. With a shot glass and an egg yolk, you could call it a Black Eye. But at the end there's something crazy-salty, like petroleum. ★★★

There's a longer finish to the sweetness. The first one had a corduroy texture, while Brand 2 is more silky, with long threads. The fruitiness in the flavour lingers, and it smells like caramelized berry syrup. ★★★

8½ stars

MASSERIE DI SANT'ERAMO BALSAMIC VINEGAR OF MODENA 250ML \$18.99
Available at specialty and fine food stores; masserie.com

At Citizen, we do our own take on Eton Mess — meringue, cream of vanilla, berries with a tiny bit of sugar and wine, and a drizzle of balsamic. This is one to top off dessert: satisfying and smells like Fig Newtons crossed with plum. ★★★★★

Definitely a drizzler. It's got viscosity, and its clinging to the palate. I'm finding it a tiny bit cloying though. The high-end, classic balsamics have almost as many flavour derivations as wine. ★★★★★

Brand 3 is thick and sweet, and it looks like maple syrup. I'd like to know where this one is made. Because North Americans have an inclination towards sweetness, sometimes you find products that cater to that. ★★★

10½ stars

MUSSINI L'ARTE DEL GUSTO, SENE 7 ACETO BALSAMICO DI MODENA 100ML \$22.99
Available at specialty and fine food stores; mussini.it

Ha! This one is bringing out a sweat in me, it's hot. It reminds me of Heinz 57, I want to put it on my meat. Worcestershire sauce, baby. Brand 4 is my least favourite so far. The smell is strong and pungent with tones of apple. ★

Light appearance, thin texture, simple taste and the smell is heavy acetic. In the old days, aristocratic families would give away bottles of their balsamic at weddings and christenings. Brand 4 would go to crazy Uncle Harold. ★½

This must be Kraft balsamic, or balsamic lite. It's all very thin and watery. What I do with really high-quality vinegar is take it on long plane journeys. Like on a flight to Japan, I would take along a vial of balsamic, to restore me. But not Brand 4. ★

3½ stars

LA VECCHIA DISPENZA ORGANIC ACETO BALSAMICO DI MODENA 250ML \$22.99
Available at specialty and fine food stores; lavecchiadispenza.it

Did they put grape essence in here? Brand 5 is like a slush puppy, with added Bubblicious. High sheen, zero viscosity and it smells like petrol, but not in a good way. ★

This is just way overdone, it has that volatile acetone-like effect. It wouldn't surprise me if this was the most expensive brand — they did too much, thought "more is better" and just went overboard. Brand 5 is like an over-ripe Amarone. ★

Nail polish! Brand 5 looks like nail polish for Goths. I'm tempted to say it tastes like it as well, it seems made of petroleum and acetone. 0

2 stars

ANTICHI SOLAI ACETO BALSAMICO DI MODENA 250ML \$23.99
Available at specialty and fine food stores; fondomontebello.it/montebello.htm

First taste: didn't like. Second taste: I might be in love. This product is like a wolf in sheep's clothing. The texture is very smooth on the tongue, then sharply acidic. The smell is pungent yet disguised. It looks like cherry velvet. ★★½

I'm getting a very strong hit of caramel with a burn blow-back, kind of like white vinegar. There's a little viscosity, a good red appearance, some dimension in the flavour, but I don't think I'll remember it. ★★½

Brand 6 is really grabbing me at the back of the mouth. It catches the glottis. There's something industrial here, artificial balsamic DNA? ★★½

8½ stars

ACETAIA DODI IL BUON CONDIMENTO/ BALSAMIC VINEGAR CONDIMENT 250ML \$16.99
Available at specialty and fine food shops; acetaiadodi.it

Wow, this one is hitting all the targets. The aroma is fruity and sweet. It has a classic colour, with a mixture of hues. The taste is balanced, and the texture is smooth and clear with a caramel overlay. ★★★★★

The last one was ideal for drizzling over dessert; this one is the dessert. You get richness on every level. Nothing sticks out too much, so this one will work in the kitchen. I'm getting plum, fig and caramel. ★★★

The look of Brand 7 is like floodwaters receding. The texture is thick and slightly glaucous. I taste caramel and although the sweetness is pleasant, on another occasion I might find it a little cloying. ★★★

10½ stars

ACETAIA LA BONISSIMA (SRL) EMILEA BORDEAUX 250ML \$22.99
Available at specialty and fine food stores; acetialabonissima.it and sarafino.com

Zippy! It's a real pucker tucker, and I'm tasting all sorts of stuff like pear and tropical fruit. The texture is thin and watery like a booze-can cocktail. Nice amber hue, and it smells like pear and juniper. ★★½

Brand 8 is bright. It's got very high acid, veering into a light acetone, and there's a high-toned, unhealthy smell and taste. You could drizzle this one on salad with some Parmesan, arugula and olive oil. ★★½

It has a slight acetone aspect, not unpleasant — it makes me salivate, actually. Speaking of salivating, earlier, somebody suggested we nominate our favourite ultimate taste. For me, it's fresh underground white truffles. They're like a drug. ★★½

7½ stars

The Results: Shelf Life's search for a satisfying affordable balsamic vinegar ended with a tie at the top, a range of scores in the middle and, at the bottom, a pair of stragglers that no one wanted to roll out the barrel for. The two best brands, Masserie Di Sant'Eramo and Acetaia Dodi, featured an added bonus — each was under \$20. (Speaking of cost-effectiveness, note that the lowest-scoring brand, La Vecchia Dispensa, gives greater value than the other clanger, Mussini L'Arte del Gusto; both are priced at \$22.99, but the latter bottle yields only 100mL.)

Off the Menu: Our judges suggested three ways to properly handle the mighty nectar. First, choose the right vinegar for the right job. A very fine vinegar should be showcased — drizzled on, say, cheese, grilled fish or desserts — in order to underscore its marvellous character. A thinner, lesser-quality product can be employed as a workhorse in salad dressings and other blends. Second, make Grade B balsamics into Grade Better balsamics by reducing them. Most budget brands can be cooked down in a skillet or saucepan to produce greater viscosity and increased depth of flavour. Finally, the fun part: adding balsamic to favourite foods. Ice cream is fun, avocado is dreamy, something like a ripe tomatoes-fresh-mozzarella-basil-and-sea-salt combo is spectacular, and a well-rounded balsamic vinegar with prosciutto and melon adds up to a fortune on the tongue. For more value-for-money messages in a bottle, visit shelflifetastetest.com.