



# Traditional Balsamic Vinegar from Modena a



**B**alsamic, that is, aromatic, fragrant, health-giving, medicinal, miraculous. These are a few of the possible meanings of the adjective associated with a vinegar produced in the area of Modena and Reggio Emilia from time

immemorial. It comes from long ageing of cooked must, commonly, but incorrectly, known as "saba" or "sapa" because saba is a more concentrated form. Its beneficial properties were already known to the ancient Romans. Cato, Ovid, Pliny and Columellus wrote about Sapa, describing it in particular as a condiment and preservative for fruit.

Nearer our times, the Bolognese doctor Baldassarre Pisanelli in his treatise *On the nature of foods and drink* written in 1611, stated that *Cooked must, commonly called Sapa, if made with red wine, is very nourishing, provides great nutriment, but consumes and removes chest catarrh... mixed in a poultice made of bran and salt, it effectively relieves pain.*

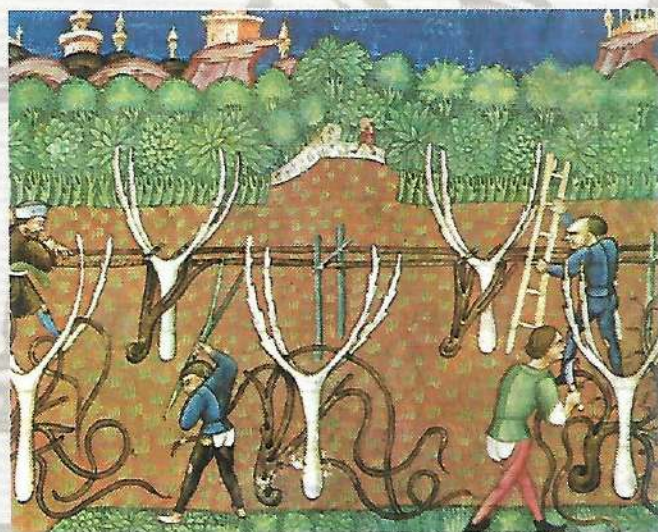
In olden times saba was also widely used to correct excessively sharp wines and vinegars. Saba or cooked must was and still is a condiment for foods: from turnips to various types of bread, in particular a type of special Christmas bread, up to the rather more recent "polenta". There is ample oral evidence of this but written proof also exists, for example, the letter by Ludovico Ariosto written to the Master Annibale Malagucio in which, complaining about the life at court, he stated:

[...c9] *At my house I'd rather have a turnip to cook, and cooked on a stick I take and mash and spread it with a little vinegar and must, than the food there thrush, partridge or wild boar; and so under a humble blanket, as if it were of silk or gold, I sleep well ...*

Vinegar and cooked must, probably mixed to tone down excessive acidity in vinegar, may be the origin of the long and complex balsamic process that has

earned the title of "traditional", that is, a product resulting from long stratified use deriving from teaching mainly handed down orally and through practice. It is difficult to say exactly when the balsamic vinegar culture had its beginnings in time. Almost certainly, like all discoveries in the culinary arts, one can imagine that it arose from a fortunate, extremely lucky chance of having found a forgotten, badly sealed container of cooked must mixed with vinegar in which, over time, an unexpected chemical process had begun, enhancing the initial properties so much that people tried to produce it intentionally.

For obvious reasons it is impossible to make a concrete comparison between the quality of modern and ancient balsamic vinegar. Among the oldest listed, there is one found in Carpi by Giuseppe Pecchi coming from the vinegar loft of an old local family, preserved in a dark, 500cc bottle labelled *Balsamico brusco 1785*. When it was bottled, this balsamic vinegar was taken from the vinegar loft, set apart and sealed with a cork because it was considered "finished". After more than two hundred years, on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 1995 at 9.30 p.m., in the presence of a notary and witnessed by the Grand Master of the Balsamic Vinegar Consorteria, Prof. Francesco Sacconi, the Consorteria Council and expert tasters, this was





# Carpi tradition as well

opened, examined and declared by Vincenzo Ferrari Amorotti to be in a perfect state of conservation and intensely aromatic. This bottle of sharp balsamic vinegar from 1785 currently holds pride of place in the Balsamic Vinegar Museum in Spilamberto.

There may be a trace of an old vinegar loft in Carpi in the diary of Gian Marsiglio Pio, preserved in the Carpi Town Archives in the Pio Archives. In an inventory of the things moved on the day of San Michello on the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1491, among other things, apart from a long list of vessels of various and imposing sizes, there were listed: two barrels of vinegar, two other barrels of verjuice, three small barrels of cooked wine.

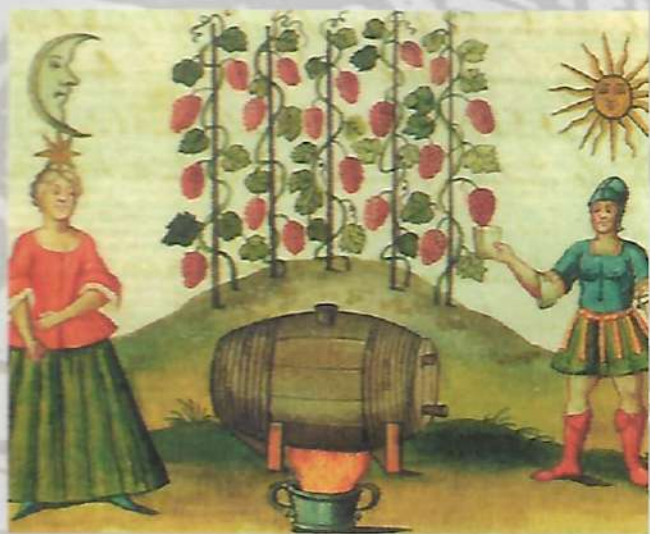
The raw materials to produce it were certainly not lacking in the Carpi territory, given that the viticulture of all species of lambrusco prospered in the past and continues to flourish. As well, particularly in the past, the species of grapes called *Occhio di Gatto* and *Berzolino* were found in abundance.

From a brief survey recently carried out in Carpi, it has been noted that many families descended from the nobility or landed gentry keep on producing balsamic vinegar, a heritage of the ancient tradition which is being carried on by men in particular, who make no mystery

of the fact that they have been instructed in the art by elderly women in their families. From this we are led to believe that the long, careful and patient process of balsamic vinegar making with its secrets was in particular a feminine province. A person could be responsible for the vinegar loft only at a mature age after having worked as an assistant for a long time with the elder woman who conscientiously entrusted the continuity of the tradition to another younger female member of the family who showed aptitude and interest in it. The tradition, whose methods sprung from a common origin, spread out into an infinite range of specialities which, while remaining true to the orthodox method, created balsamic vinegars with unmistakably distinct traits, so that it can be claimed that each one had a family imprint.

The Benassi family also had a vinegar loft, handed down through the generations, which is still in production and run by Dr Ruggero Benassi who said that the oldest cask, inherited from his aunt Maria Ferrari, dates back to the 1700's.

The families Barbieri and Martinelli, the latter an heir of a branch of the Barbieri family, still continue to run their vinegar lofts following the guide-lines of the



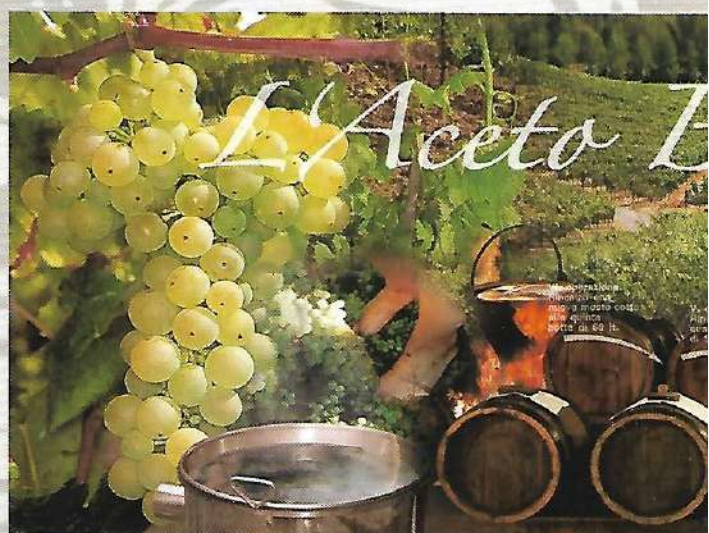


teaching handed down from generation to generation. From a statement by Olivo Barbieri we learn that his mother Maria Barbieri (she had the same surname as his father) started him on learning the art of balsamic vinegar making.

Candida and Mario Schiavi from Cortile are vinegar producers as are the Zironi family from San Martino Secchia who, when they took over the old Bertesi family property, came into possession of the equally old vinegar loft in the tower. We know for sure that the Foresti family also produced balsamic vinegar and we can deduce how precious the ownership of a vinegar loft was from the last will and testament of the knight Pietro Foresti, a cultured man, member of the Town Commission for National History, holding the office of Royal Inspector for the monuments and the excavations for the council districts of Carpi, Novi and Concordia and who was very generous towards the city of Carpi. On the 5<sup>th</sup> January 1923 he wrote: *In full possession of my mental faculties, I write by my own hand these my last wishes calling on the Holy Lord for His assistance so that I may not involuntarily run into some error or omission... to my beloved wife [a list of various goods follows], the landau and fine harness and a quarter of the barrels of vinegar ... To my beloved*

*son Carlo Alberto I bequeath [a list of various goods follows] all my art books and a quarter part of the barrels of vinegar ... To my dear son Aldo [a list of various goods follows] I bequeath a quarter part of the barrels of vinegar and a vehicle of his choice ... To my dearly loved son Giorgio the lawyer ... a quarter part of the vinegar ...* The vinegar loft, containing 12 casks which were split up after his death, was kept in Palazzo Foresti in Carpi, the same building where Pietro Foresti had created such an important art gallery that it was cited in the monograph on Carpi included in "Le cento città d'Italia" – "The hundred towns of Italy". In 1956 the Foresti family allowed Mario Sacchetti to take samples for research purposes from six of the 12 casks or vessels in the vinegar loft which had remained together thanks to the people living together who had inherited them. Regarding this he reported: " [...] the samples from the casks, taken at a time half-way between the annual topping up with concentrated must, allowed me to ascertain that the balsamic vinegar was in a perfect state regarding the usual organoleptic properties, taste, fragrance, consistence and colour typical of this product ..."

Skill and immense care with no time or cost savings, the traditional balsamic vinegar has always called for





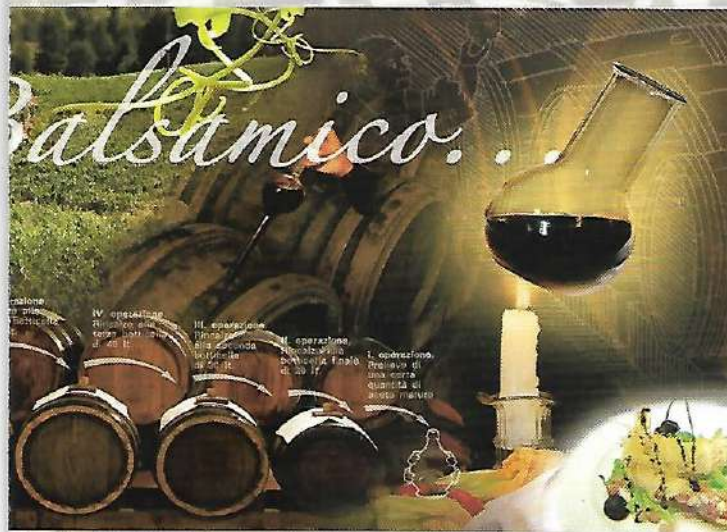
great expertise together with suitable casks, spaces and exposition.

These are the reasons why the production and consumption of balsamic vinegar has been the prerogative of very few, an exclusive class which, during past centuries, was certainly not oriented towards marketing. It was a product destined for use in the family or as an exclusive gift for a very limited circle of people held in high esteem who were also capable to fully appreciate the value of the gift received.

*Luciana Nora. Carpi Town Council Ethnographic Centre*

From the left:

- Grapes marinated in elm, illuminated manuscript reproduction (XIV-XV century)
- Pruning the vines, reproduction from Virgil's Georgics (XV century)
- Allegory of cooking the must, reproduction (XVII century)
- The Arletti family working on the harvest - Carpi, photo early 1920's
- Museo dell'Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena at Spilamberto, interior
- The main production stages of the Traditional Balsamic Vinegar from Modena







# The town vinegar loft in Carpi

## WHERE IT IS



Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Scacchetti family – traders in straw hats – decided to build their own house on an area used for commercial activities facing the main square of the city. On this old built-up area there were some buildings in an advanced state of deterioration.

The construction was planned by local craftsmen who took their inspiration from various creations by the ducal architects working on the Po Valley plains.

Social changes and economic problems brought about the loss of ownership of the building for the Scacchetti family and from the beginning of

the 1800's it became the property of the Carpi Community which used it to house public offices. The necessary restoration work and the new uses intended for the building transformed this private residence into a new and attractive municipal centre, reflecting the nineteenth century neoclassical taste, cancelling out all Rococo touches.

After the twentieth century world wars, the building maintained its central role in the civic life of the city and underwent a few definitive structural changes up to the overall restoration completed in 2004, resulting in the current appearance of the building.

Of the original building, the following elements remain: the façade above a portico with five arches, the shape of the windows on the second floor, the small oval windows providing light for the attic and the pilasters with flared capitals as decoration on the façade.



The façade of the Town Hall building in a photograph from the beginning of the 1900's.



The Town Hall, detail of a 19<sup>th</sup> century fresco by Claudio Rossi.



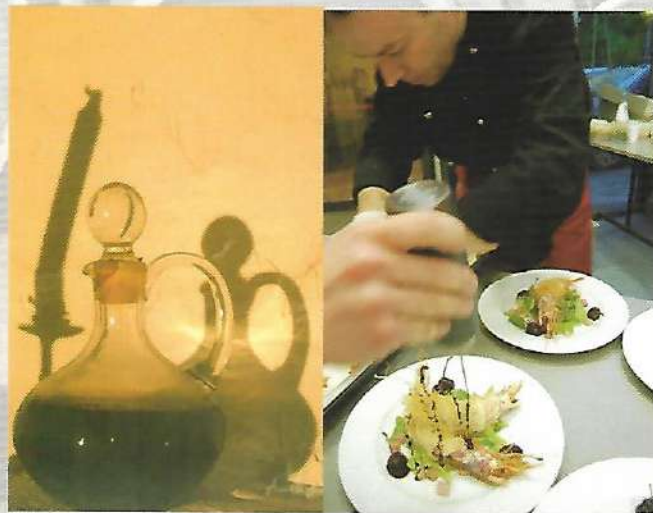
## TRADITIONAL BALSAMIC VINEGAR FROM MODENA

The *dark nectar* is a typical product originating in the area of the old Estense family dominions and is one of the traditional products from the Modenese territory famous all over the world.

The operations bringing the *Balsamico* to our tables are complex and go through many stages: nothing is left to chance and everything is the result of a skilled art handed down from generation to generation.

Created through spontaneous changes in cooked must, after slow cooking reducing the volume to a half or even a third of the original amount, **made** from grapes cultivated for centuries in our area such as Trebbiano di Spagna, Lambrusco Grasparossa, Lambrusco di Sorbara, Lambrusco Salamino and Ancellotta -, **matured** through slow acetification coming from natural fermentation and progressive concentration by very long ageing in a series of different wooden casks, **in appearance it has a deep, dark, bright colour.**

No aromatic substances are added and it has a particular, complex and penetrating bouquet accompanied by a well-balanced sweet and sour flavour.



## THE TOWN VINEGAR LOFT IN CARPI

The Carpi Vinegar Loft is located in the attic area of Palazzo Scacchetti. The Town Council wished to pay a tribute to this typical product found also in the Carpi area by setting up a vinegar loft able to produce the *Balsamico*.

This product will be offered to guests of the city to remind them of a centuries-old art that even now sees man and nature playing an essential role in its creation. The vinegar loft contains three sets of fine casks, named in memory of important people in Carpi's past: *Maria Beatrice, Caterina and Adelaide*, accompanied by two "mother" casks used to top up the sets of casks.

At the moment the sets contain a number of casks varying from a minimum of six up to eight, made of different types of wood and with varying graded capacities. The kinds of wood used for the construction of the casks are oak, chestnut, ash, robinia and cherry.

The use of casks in graded sizes is essential to the *Balsamico* production. The largest ones, made of soft wood, and the "mother" casks start off the alcoholic fermentation caused by micro-organisms





(homophylic yeasts) able to demolish the sugar molecule transforming it into ethyl alcohol and then into acetic acid through other micro-organisms (vinegar bacteria).

The central casks made of medium-hard wood are used to mature the vinegar, while the smallest casks of hard, long-lasting wood are used for ageing, a period when fragrances and flavours find their best equilibrium through physical and oxidative types of changes for an indefinite time.

When they have reached the standard ageing, every spring, for one single time, the set of casks undergoes the most delicate phase in the production of the traditional Balsamic Vinegar from Modena: the *siphoning off*, the *transferring* and the *topping up*. From the smallest cask an amount of *balsamico* is syphoned off, which must not be more than 10-15 % of the total capacity, ready to be used.

Going up in the graded sizes, each cask is topped up with vinegar drawn off from the one beside it of a larger size until the largest cask is reached which receives partly acetified must from the "mother" cask.

Each year the mother casks are filled up with suitably concentrated, partly fermented cooked must according to the needs of the casks.

