



FLAVOUR NOTES

SERIES II

The Chef's Flavour System

VINEGARS

Issue 19: Vinegars — The Controlled Acid System

We have already explored the many ways acids can boost, balance and sharpen flavour. This week, we go deeper into one of the kitchen's most versatile forms of acidity: vinegar.

Growing up in England, vinegar largely meant malt vinegar—most memorably shaken over fish and chips. I was never particularly fond of its somewhat harsh character. As my cooking developed, however, discovering wine, cider, rice, balsamic and particularly sherry vinegars completely changed my perspective. If you've never compared them, try replacing an everyday vinegar with a good sherry vinegar in a simple salad. The transformation can be remarkable.

One of my favourite discoveries came in the West Indies. Rather than discard mango trimmings, I steeped them in coconut vinegar, creating a beautifully aromatic vinegar that eventually found its way into a sauce for duck—a tropical interpretation inspired by the classical French tradition of poultry cooked with vinegar.

It delivered flavour, reduced waste and reflected the destination. A win all round. Vinegar may begin with fermentation, but in the hands of a cook it becomes something much more interesting: a precise tool for controlling flavour.





Kitchen Haiku

Wine quietly turns
Sharpness awakens flavour
Balance in a drop

This Week's Focus

Vinegar is produced when alcohol is converted by acetic acid bacteria into acetic acid. Because the original alcohol can begin with grapes, apples, rice, grains and many other ingredients, the resulting vinegars carry dramatically different flavour characteristics.

For the chef, that diversity makes vinegar far more than "sourness". It can brighten, balance, preserve, pickle, deglaze, marinate and become a defining component of sauces and condiments.



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Flavour Lens

Profile

Sharp, bright, fruity, malty, wine-like, sweet, nutty or complex.

Behaviour

Cuts richness, heightens perception of other flavours and changes significantly through reduction, infusion and ageing

Balance Role

Controls richness and sweetness, adds freshness and prevents dishes from becoming heavy or flat

Key Pairings

Fatty meats, fish, vegetables, fruits, pulses, herbs, oils, mustard, sugar and reduced sauces



Chef's Insight

Acidity is most successful when the diner notices what it has done rather than simply tasting vinegar.

A few drops can wake up a sauce. A vinaigrette can transform raw vegetables. Pickling can preserve an ingredient while completely changing its character.

The objective is control..

[Click for Podcast: Podcast #19 Vinegar.mp3](#)

Ingredient Spotlight — Sherry Vinegar

Sherry vinegar is one of the easiest ways to discover that vinegars are not interchangeable. Its mature, nutty, wine-like complexity can transform something as simple as a tomato salad or vinaigrette. It provides acidity, certainly—but also flavour in its own right.

Kitchen Curiosity

A Vinegar begins with another fermentation.

Sugars are first fermented into alcohol. Acetic acid bacteria then transform that alcohol into the characteristic acidity of vinegar.

The starting material matters: grapes, apples, rice, grains and other ingredients leave their own signatures behind.

Around the World

Britain — Malt vinegar with fish and chips

France — Wine vinegars, vinaigrettes and vinegar-based sauces

Spain — Sherry vinegar

Italy — Balsamic traditions

Japan — Rice vinegar for sushi and pickles

Philippines — Cane, coconut and palm vinegars in adobo and dipping sauces

Caribbean — Cane and coconut vinegars, pickles and pepper sauces

Different traditions. Different raw materials. The same remarkable ability to control flavour.





Kitchen Practice

Technique: Taste vinegar as deliberately as you would wine. Consider aroma, intensity, sweetness and character before choosing it.

Timing: Add early when vinegar needs to mellow or penetrate; add towards the end when brightness is required.

Common Mistakes: Assuming all vinegars simply provide acidity. A harsh vinegar can dominate delicate ingredients, while an overly sweet vinegar can change the balance entirely.

Professional Approach: Choose vinegar according to the food, then use only enough to make the other flavours clearer.



Practical Applications

- Sherry Vinegar — tomatoes, mushrooms, lentils, nuts, roasted vegetables
- Cider Vinegar — pork, apples, cabbage, mustard, root vegetables
- Red Wine Vinegar — beef, lamb, onions, beans, robust herbs
- White Wine Vinegar — fish, chicken, delicate herbs, butter sauces
- Rice Vinegar — seafood, cucumber, rice, ginger, sesame
- Balsamic — tomatoes, strawberries, figs, Parmesan, roasted vegetables
- Coconut Vinegar — pork, duck, chicken, mango, chilli, tropical aromatics
- Malt Vinegar — fried fish, potatoes, pickled onions, robust condiments



A practical application of this week's flavour system

Pan-Roasted Duck with Mango Coconut Vinegar Sauce

Pan-roasted duck breast served with a glossy sauce made by deglazing the pan with mango-infused coconut vinegar and finishing with reduced brown sauce. Fresh mango, sweet peppers and coriander provide brightness and texture against the richness of the duck.

What This Dish Teaches

Here, vinegar performs several jobs. Mango trimmings are steeped in coconut vinegar for 24-48 hours, creating an aromatic flavoured vinegar and giving useful trim a second purpose.

The vinegar then deglazes the duck pan and is reduced before the brown sauce and stock are added. Crucially, the finished sauce retains sufficient acidity to cut through the richness of the duck rather than simply tasting sour. That is controlled acidity in action.



Recipe Link: [Pan Seared Duck with Mango Coconut Vinegar Sauce](#)



The Liquid Counterpoint

A lightly chilled Pinot Noir would complement the duck without overwhelming the mango and coconut vinegar. For a non-alcoholic pairing, sparkling water with mango, lime and a few coriander leaves would echo the freshness of the garnish.



From the Kitchen

Taste before adding more.

If the first thing you notice is vinegar, ask whether you've gone too far.



Professional Uses

Flavoured vinegars are worth exploring.

Fruit trimmings, herbs and other suitable aromatics can turn a familiar vinegar into something distinctive while opening opportunities for creative use of ingredients that might otherwise be wasted.

The important question is not simply "What can I infuse?"

It is "Where will I use it?"



Chef's Reflection

Vinegar should make the food taste more alive—not simply more acidic.

FLAVOUR NOTES

Vinegars

— The Controlled Acid System —
Flavour System Focus: Foundations

Vinegar brings acidity, balance, brightness and complexity — each variety with its own voice.

1. INGREDIENT / COMPONENT FAMILY

Vinegar Type	Characteristics	Best For
Red Wine Vinegar	Bold, fruity, robust	Reductions, marinades, pickling, sauces
White Wine Vinegar	Light, clean, crisp	Salads, dressings, marinades, pickling, sauces
Sherry Vinegar	Nutty, complex, mellow	Salads, dressings, marinades, pickling, sauces
Apple Cider Vinegar	Fruity, tangy, approachable	Salads, dressings, marinades, pickling, sauces
Balsamic Vinegar	Sweet, dense, complex	Salads, dressings, marinades, pickling, sauces
Rice Vinegar	Mild, delicate, slightly sweet	Salads, dressings, marinades, pickling, sauces
Malt Vinegar	Sharp, malty, traditional	Salads, dressings, marinades, pickling, sauces
Coconut Vinegar	Mild, slightly tropical	Salads, dressings, marinades, pickling, sauces

2. SYSTEM FUNCTION

Function	Description
Adds Acidity	Adds the essential acid that brightens and awakens.
Provides Balance	Cuts richness, balances sweetness and prevents heaviness.
Enhances Flavour	Heightens aromas and helps other flavours shine.
Preserves	Extends life of foods through pickling and fermentation.
Creates Complexity	Adds depth, nuance and regional character.

3. MECHANICS / BEHAVIOUR

Mechanic	Description
Fermentation	Alcohol is converted to acetic acid by bacteria.
Intensity	Varies by source, aging and dilution.
Volatility	Evaporates when heated and adds complexity.
Reduction	Mellows, concentrates and adds complexity.
Infusion	Herbs, fruits, spices and peels create flavoured vinegars.

4. KITCHEN PRACTICE

Technique	Description
Taste	Taste vinegar as deliberately as you would wine. Consider aroma, intensity, sweetness and character.
Timing	Add early to mellow and penetrate; add late to preserve brightness.
Common Mistakes	Using too much, or the wrong vinegar. Assuming all vinegars are interchangeable.
Professional Approach	Choose vinegar for the food and use only enough to make the other flavours clearer.

5. PAIRING LOGIC

Vinegar	Pairing
Red Wine	Red meat, lentils, mushrooms, roasted vegetables, herbs
White Wine	Fish, shellfish, chicken, soft cheeses, greens
Sherry	Tartar, beans, olive oil, leafy salads, manchego
Apple Cider	Pork, cabbage, carrots, grain salads, slaws
Balsamic	Strawberries, aged cheeses, glazes, roasted vegetables
Rice	Sushi, pickles, seaweed, stir-fries, cucumber
Malt	Fish & chips, pickles, chutneys, brown sauces
Coconut	Pickles, tropical fruits, Asian dressings, seafood

6. APPLICATION / IN COOKING

Application	Description
Dressings & Vinaigrettes	Use as the acid base. Balance with oil, salt, mustard or emulsions.
Marinades	Tenderises, seasons and adds brightness. Combine with oil, herbs and aromatics.
Deglazing	Lift flavour from the pan. Reduce for sauces and gravies.
Pickling	Preserves and transforms. Adjust acidity, salt, sugar and aromatics.
Finishing	A few drops at the end add vital brightness and lift.

7. ADVANCED COMPARISON

Vinegar	Comparison
Red Wine	VS White Wine
Sherry	VS Apple Cider
Balsamic	VS Rice
Malt	VS Coconut

8. CONTEXT & INTENT

From ancient fermentation to modern kitchen, vinegar is found in every culinary tradition. Different raw materials, different climates, different cultures — the same power to control flavour.

9. PREPARATION TECHNIQUES

- Infuse with herbs, spices, citrus or fruits.
- Reduce to concentrate flavour and sweetness.
- Blend vinegars for balance and complexity.
- Always taste and adjust to the dish.

10. STORAGE / PRACTICAL TIPS

- Store in a cool, dark place away from heat.
- Keep bottles tightly sealed.
- Quality vinegar lasts indefinitely.
- Flavoured vinegars are best used within 6-12 months.

11. CHEF'S REMINDER

The right vinegar in the right dish at the right time — a small decision with a big impact. Taste. Adjust. Balance. Lift.

Vinegar Types: Origin & Common Uses

Vinegar Type	Origin / Base	Flavor Profile	Common Uses
White Distilled	Distilled grain alcohol	Sharp, clean, highly acidic	Pickling, marinades, sauces, household cleaning
Apple Cider	Fermented apple juice/cider	Fruity, tangy, slightly sweet	Salad dressings, marinades, chutneys, sauces
Balsamic	Grape must; traditionally associated with Modena/Reggio Emilia, Italy	Sweet, rich, complex	Salads, roasted vegetables, cheese, fruit, glazes
Red Wine	Red wine	Bold, fruity, tangy	Vinaigrettes, marinades, braised dishes, sauces
White Wine	White wine	Light, crisp, mildly fruity	Seafood, poultry, delicate sauces, vinaigrettes
Rice Vinegar	Fermented rice or rice wine	Mild, slightly sweet	Sushi rice, Asian dressings, dipping sauces, pickles
Black Rice Vinegar	Rice and/or grains; common in China	Deep, malty, smoky	Dumpling dips, braises, stir-fries, noodles
Sherry Vinegar	Sherry wine; Spain	Nutty, complex, moderately sweet	Gazpacho, vinaigrettes, sauces, roasted vegetables
Malt Vinegar	Malted barley; strongly associated with Britain	Toasty, robust, malty	Fish and chips, pickles, sauces
Champagne Vinegar	Champagne-style/white wine	Delicate, bright, mild	Light vinaigrettes, seafood, vegetables
Cane Vinegar	Sugarcane juice or syrup; common in Southeast Asia	Mild, slightly sweet	Dipping sauces, marinades, pickling
Coconut Vinegar	Coconut sap or coconut water; Southeast Asia	Tangy, mildly fruity	Curries, marinades, dipping sauces, pickles

Quick guide: Choose **white distilled** for strong acidity, **rice or champagne vinegar** for delicate dishes, **balsamic** for sweetness, and **wine or sherry vinegar** when you want more depth and complexity.



Last Word

"Vinegar should make the food taste more alive—not simply more acidic."

Further Reading & Resources

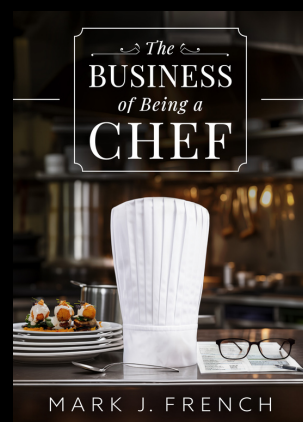
From the Library

See flavour balance charts and acidity mapping in the ChefsNotebooks archives.

The Business of Being a Chef

For a deeper understanding of flavour structure and kitchen systems, The Business of Being a Chef provides useful operational context alongside culinary insight.

<https://chefsnotebooks.com/books>



The Business of Being a Chef is the result of more than 30 years of experience in hotels and restaurants throughout the world. It is a guide to managing the multiple business demands of today's executive chef, encompassing diverse areas including cooking, taste, food safety, human resources, finance, and sales & marketing, amongst others. It is also a great resource for operations managers.

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Mark J French is a hotelier, chef, consultant, and author of several books on culinary arts and business. Based in the UK and Philippines, he blends classical training with global flavours.

