

Vive Garden-Fresh Vinaigrettes!

They aren't just for lettuce anymore

BY DIANE FORLEY

At its simplest, a vinaigrette is no more than oil, vinegar, and pinches of salt and pepper. But a really good vinaigrette can be much, much more than a simple concoction you pour over salad greens. It can play the role of a sauce in appetizers, entrées, even desserts. Vinaigrettes can be used with vegetables, fruit, pasta, fish, and meat.

The classic vinaigrette is a mixture of oil and vinegar. These two ingredients have a symbiotic relationship. Oil forms a viscous coating that allows the acidic flavor of the vinegar to be distributed evenly. Without the oil, the vinegar would slide to the bottom of the plate. Without the vinegar, the oil could taste flat.


A Repertoire of Vinegars

There are several ways to put a spin on the classic vinaigrette. First of all, you can expand your choice of vinegars. The ones I use most often are red wine, white wine, champagne, sherry, and balsamic. They each have distinctive properties.


Wine vinegar has a venerable history and is widely used. Its flavor is full of fruit and typically rich, reflecting the grapes it's made from. Because its taste is generally robust, red-wine vinegar is best used with assertive foods. In comparison, white wine and champagne vinegars are lighter and enhance delicate flavors. Champagne vinegar works especially well for infusions and vegetable marinades.

Sherry vinegar is sweeter and more complex than other wine vinegars. Use it on substantial salads, especially those with meat, poultry, cheese, and fruit. It's excellent blended with nut oils. Balsamic vinegar is wildly popular now, and for good reason. Dark, pungent, both sweet and tart, balsamic vinegar can be savored on its own, without oil or other additions.

Take your vinegars a step further by adding flavors through infusion or intensifying them through reduction. Infusion involves steeping a flavorful ingredient, such as an herb, in a heated liquid. The most common way to make an infusion is by steeping one or



Dress up the traditional three-to-one ratio of oil to vinegar with additions like chile oil (left), roasted oranges (right), and beet juice (far right).



more ingredients in a light-bodied red-wine or champagne vinegar, then straining the liquid. Candidates for steeping include vegetables, onions, shallots, and herbs. To steep, add the combination of your choice to the vinegar and heat without boiling for 10 minutes (see the recipe for Red Wine Vinaigrette on p. 47).

Reducing a vinegar requires boiling it until the volume is reduced by evaporation. The result is thickened consistency and intensified flavor. Simmering down vinegar softens its raw edge and results in a syrup with a sweet and sour taste, heightened flavor, and added viscosity. You can reduce a vinegar by half or more, depending on the intensity and consistency you want. You'll find that the high sugar content in sherry and balsamic vinegars makes them particularly good candidates for reduction.

A New Cast of Oils

Making your own flavored oils opens up a whole realm of new tastes. If you're going to flavor oil, it's best to use one with a neutral taste like grape seed or a light-bodied olive oil to avoid competing flavors. Flavored oils can be used in lieu of adding the seasoning directly to a dish. For example, Chile Oil (see the recipe on p. 47) adds a distinctive spiciness to food.

Firm herbs such as rosemary, and flavor enhancers like peppercorns and garlic cloves can be infused into oil. To do this, heat whole herbs in the oil just until hot, then remove from the stove and allow to sit for an hour. Cool and strain through a fine sieve. Freshly chopped herbs can also be added to hot oil. They do not need to be strained out. Flavored oils can be stored for up to a week.

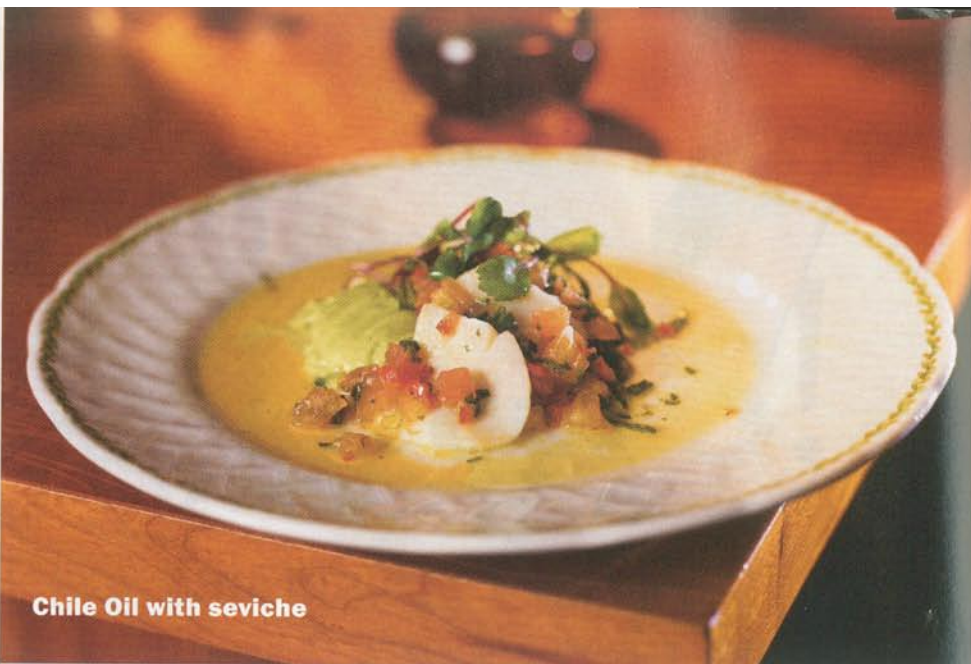
You can also make herb and oil blends. Cook soft herbs like basil, tarragon, and chives in boiling water for about 30 seconds, or until they turn bright green, then shock them in ice water, drain, and place in a blender. Add a slow, steady stream of oil to blend the herbs. You'll need approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ cup oil per



Juicing a roasted orange releases a bittersweet aroma that hints at the taste of the vinaigrette.

2 tablespoons herb purée. This herb and oil blend can now be swirled into a vinaigrette to boost flavor.

Another variation is to use just oil. A fine-quality, extra-virgin olive oil can, on its own, enhance a simple vegetable salad. When distinctive oils, such as nut oils,



Chile Oil with seviche

pumpkin seed oil, or some varieties of olive oil are used alone, the flavor of the oil stands out. Strong-tasting greens like frisée or endive work well with nut oils. Assertive vegetables like artichokes and roasted peppers, as well as fish and seafood, are delicious with a good, fruity olive oil. Eggplant, which absorbs flavors like a sponge, is also complemented by a fruity olive oil.

Vegetable Scraps and Stocks Intensify Flavor

Vegetable purées add body and clean vegetable flavor to vinaigrettes. And the purée's viscosity helps create a stronger emulsion. Because of the saucelike consistency of this type of vinaigrette, it's great with fish, pasta, and meat entrées. Vegetable scraps are perfect for purées. Red pepper tops, asparagus bottoms, tomato seeds, and cucumber centers have lots of flavor. They can be puréed raw or blanched, and blended with grape seed oil, tasting as you go to correct the seasoning, then passed through a fine-mesh strainer. The purée will keep for several days in the refrigerator. Use it as you would mustard, about 2 teaspoons per cup of vinaigrette.

Vegetable stocks both stabilize and intensify flavors. A vinaigrette with added stock can be used cold as a dressing over salads or warm as an accompaniment to fish, meat, or vegetables. To use a vegetable stock for vinaigrette, reduce the stock by half. For 1 cup of vinaigrette, combine $\frac{1}{2}$ cup stock and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vinegar, and whisk in $\frac{2}{3}$ cup oil.

Sweet and Sour Additions

The inherent sweetness of fruits and vegetables can be a great asset in balancing the acidity of some vinaigrettes. Fruits, vegetables, and herbs can be combined in a vinaigrette recipe in the form of reduced vegetable broths, purées, and fruit juices. Remember that an acidic juice will replace some of the acid called for in a vinaigrette.

Similarly, mustard is a sour ingredient, so if you use it, you'll need less acid, or the acid must be counterbalanced. The best way to tell whether the components of a vinaigrette work together is by tasting them.

Test a vinaigrette's consistency, as well. The thickness should depend on the vinaigrette's use. For example, if you are making a vinaigrette for a green salad, dip a leaf into the vinaigrette. It should adhere to the lettuce at first, then gently drip off.

Experimenting can lead to great discoveries of new flavors, and combinations from the garden are endless. Use personalized oils and vinegars in classic proportions to create innovative vinaigrettes. Remember to trust your taste buds, and adjust the seasonings to suit yourself.

Puttanesca Vinaigrette

Makes $3\frac{1}{2}$ cups

- 2 shallots, chopped fine**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ Spanish onion, chopped fine**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup olive oil**
- 3 cloves garlic, chopped fine**

**5 large beefsteak tomatoes,
4 roughly chopped, 1 seeded
and chopped fine**
2 Tbs. capers, drained
3 anchovies, rinsed in cold water
2 Tbs. sugar
¼ cup balsamic vinegar
Salt and pepper
¼ cup flat parsley leaves, chopped

Gently sauté the shallots and onion in 2 Tbs. of the olive oil in a covered pan over low heat until translucent. When they're almost done, add the garlic. Then add the 4 roughly chopped tomatoes. Cook, uncovered, over medium-low heat for 15 min.

Add the capers, anchovies, and sugar. Cook another 5 min., remove from heat, and cool. Place the sauce in a food processor and purée until thick.

Stir in the balsamic vinegar. Slowly whisk in the remaining olive oil. Season with salt and pepper. Fold in the finely chopped tomatoes and the parsley.



NOTE: This vinaigrette is good with pasta, grilled fish, and Mediterranean food, or chilled with antipasti.

Red Wine Vinaigrette

Makes 2 cups

¾ cup red wine vinegar
2 shallots, minced
2 Tbs. sugar
1 Tbs. beet juice (optional)
1¼ cups extra-virgin olive oil
Salt
1 tsp. ground black pepper

Heat the red wine vinegar with the shallots and sugar in a saucepan. Add the beet juice, which will liven up the color and turn the shallots a deep purple. Heat gently without boiling for at least 10 min. Cool, then whisk in the olive oil and season with salt and pepper.

NOTE: This is a simple oil and vinegar-based vinaigrette that is good with chilled vegetables like leeks or tomatoes, mesclun greens, or even summer fruits.

Chile Oil

Makes 2 cups

1 cup canola oil
1 cup olive oil
1 Tbs. chili powder
½ tsp. dry mustard

½ tsp. whole coriander seed
½ tsp. ground cumin seed
½ tsp. ground paprika
1 Tbs. dried chiles or ¼ chipotle
¼ sweet red pepper, chopped

Place oils in a 4-quart saucepan. Add spices and peppers. Heat the oil briefly (do not boil), then remove from heat and allow to sit for one hour. Strain into glass jars and store, covered and refrigerated, for up to 10 days.

NOTE: For a warm dressing for fish or a chilled marinade for seafood, like seviche, blend ½ cup chile oil with 1 cup lemon or lime juice. Add scallions and chopped parsley or cilantro.

Roasted Orange Vinaigrette

Makes 1 cup

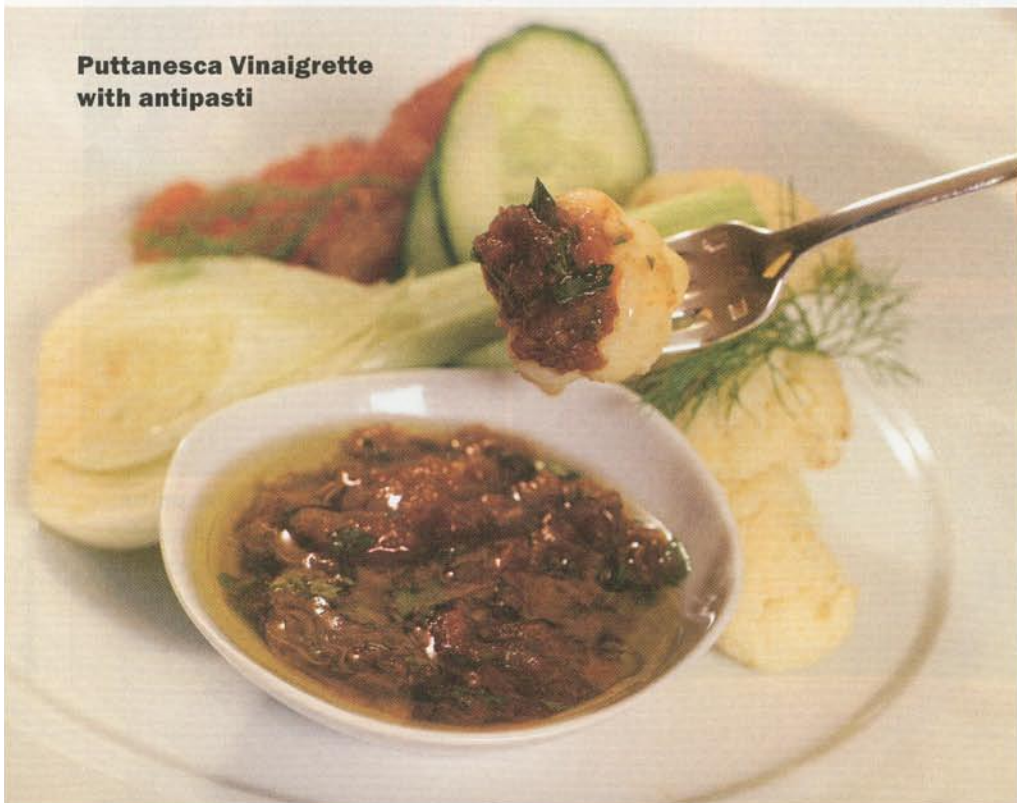
5 oranges
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 bulb fennel, diced
2 stalks celery, diced
½ clove garlic, chopped
1 cup fresh orange juice
⅓ cup grape seed oil or light olive oil

Preheat oven to 350°F. Place the 5 unpeeled oranges in a roasting pan and bake until browned, about 45 min. Let the oranges cool and juice them.

Heat the olive oil in a saucepan and sauté the fennel, celery, and garlic until soft. Measure the roasted orange juice and add enough fresh juice to make 2½ cups. Add the juice to the sautéed vegetables. Reduce the juice mixture over medium heat to yield 1 cup. Strain. When the mixture is cool, blend in the oil.

NOTE: Roasting the oranges results in a bittersweet orange flavor. The oil has a neutral taste that doesn't compete with that of the orange. Use this recipe for summer fruit salads, chilled seafood salads, and bitter greens like endive or radicchio.

Puttanesca Vinaigrette with antipasti



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