

FOR THE LOVE OF FOOD



RIK HALBERG

Spring veggies burst with flavor

This winter has been a tease. For the past two months I've been wishing for spring. When I see tulips popping up, crocus showing their heads and buds forming on some trees, I start to daydream about warmer, longer days.

This past week has taught me that we still have to wait for the cold to end and true warmer weather to arrive. I'm craving spring vegetables — early peas, leaf lettuce and, of course, our own morel mushrooms.

Our national obsession with immediate gratification brings produce from all over the globe to market. But how much of it tastes the way fruits and vegetables do when they're in season? Or more importantly, how much of it is safe to eat?

Granted, the variety of produce we have to choose from is great, but when is the last time you tasted a strawberry in January that had real flavor and voluptuous texture of a strawberry picked fresh in season? Or a bunch of asparagus with that fresh herbaceous flavor of just cut stalks?

Food safety concerns

In the Tuesday, March 10, issue of the *New York Times* there was an article about the rising threat of food contamination in our country. This threat stems in part from the "changing nature of the American diet and a greater reliance on imported foods."

We are bringing in an enormous amount of food into the United States from some newly developing countries, and their quality control and standards may leave a lot to be desired.

Dr. Michael Osterholm, one of the scientists at a meeting in Atlanta sponsored in part by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Society of Microbiology, challenged those who believe the United States has the safest food supply in the world. "Since we have food from all over the world," he said "it's hard to understand how food in the United States is any safer than food from other parts of the world."

This is an important point to consider when purchasing out of season produce from all over the globe. There might be some important health issues to think about.

Anticipation

For me, the anticipation of tasting spring's bounty is almost too much to take. The joy of waiting for those bursts of flavor is like a rite of passage. For the next four to six weeks I have to be content with the last of winter's great citrus fruits, root vegetables and some of the hearty greens that are available. Luckily, having a restaurant, Emily's, allows me access to many fantastic sources for the first crops of some of my favorite foods.

Some of these foods will start showing up on our early spring menu soon.

While you dream of spring, here's a Thinking of Spring dessert to try. Panna Cotta is a light, Italian eggless custard. It is great served with fresh rhubarb and tiny wild strawberries or fresh strawberries roasted with a little basting of Balsamic vinegar.

PANNA COTTA

- 1 3/4 teaspoons unflavored gelatin
- 1 1/2 cups cream
- 1/2 cup milk
- 4 tablespoons sugar
- 2 vanilla beans, split and scrapped

Soften the gelatin in a small amount of cold water (about 1/4 cup).

Scrape the vanilla bean into the milk and cream, add the sugar and bring to a boil. Pour into the gelatin and stir to dissolve. Pour into suitable molds and chill. Serves four.

Emily's next wine dinner will feature the great wines of the Cote du Rhone in

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LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Laurie Wethington of Farmington Hills shares her pork piccata recipe.
- Prize-winning main dish salads.

OIL & VINEGAR do mix!

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

High-tech communication has made this a shrinking world. We're more aware of cultural diversities, particularly as they apply to food. Dubbed "new world cuisine" by Epicureans, it appeals to modern appetites searching for healthy, easily-prepared dishes loaded with flavor and substance.

New world cuisine has brought about a phenomenal and escalating interest in both extra virgin olive oil from Greece and balsamic vinegar from Italy. Oil and vinegar do mix!

Testament to virginity

Extra virgin refers to the first cold pressing of olives which extracts oil with less than one percent oleic acid.

A.C. Nielsen market research indicates that Americans now spend \$340 million annually for high-quality extra virgin olive oil. Sales like this may bring fraudulent products to market. But the North American Olive Oil Association's regular random testing indicates that the vast majority of extra virgin olive oil is legitimately labeled.

Margaret Arvantis, owner of Bacchus Brokerage in Whitmore Lake, Mich., sells premium Greek wines, Greek olive oil and Italian balsamic vinegar. She said that the way olive oil is made is more important than where the olives are grown.

Shopping information

Sources for Morea Extra Virgin Olive Oil (\$16-20/500mL) and Villa Manodori Balsamic Vinegar (\$30-35/250mL):

- Merchant of Vino-Whole Foods (Ann Arbor, Rochester Hills, Troy and Farmington Hills)
- Papa Joe's Gourmet Market Place, Rochester
- Fine Wine Source, Livonia.

"Picking, cold pressing/processing, and storage before bottling are the essentials to the art of production," she said.

Arvantis recently introduced Morea unfiltered extra virgin olive oil from Greece to this market. She said that olives for extra virgin oil are picked earlier than olives destined for curing. "That's why the oil has a fresh, fruity character," she added. "All olives for Morea are hand picked, not shaken from trees and the olives never touch the ground."

However, the growing region and the best olives of the region do make an impact. Here's what some research on Greek olive oil revealed. For millennia, the century-old family-owned olive trees in the state of Lakonia, Peloponnes region of southern Greece, have been the source of olives grown for Morea. Collectively, they have distinguished Greece as the world's largest producer of extra virgin olive oil.

The fruitiness of Morea is due in part to oil extracted from the small (about the size of a large kidney bean), green Koroneiko olive, unique to Greece and used exclusively for Morea. This smaller olive has a lower water content. During the careful first pressing, only fresh extra virgin olive oil, with the lively fruit inherent in the olive, is extracted. It is bottled unfiltered to express a full-bodied, fresh olive sweetness.

An evolutionary process

Vinegar is the by-product of the action of a lone species of bacteria (acetobacter) on alcohol. In the presence of oxygen, acetobacters react with alcohol, in a liquid such as wine, to produce acetic acid that gives vinegar its tartness. Topping the vinegar flavor meter is delicious balsamic vinegar from Modena, Italy.

Balsamic vinegar is to the world of vinegars what extra virgin olive oil is to the array of other oils



New products: Morea Extra Virgin Olive Oil from Greece and Villa Manodori Balsamic Vinegar from Modena, Italy are new, impressive products in the marketplace.

available for cooking. Both are the very best and since they are, this is reflected in their price. But you don't need a lot of either to perk up a dish. Both should be approached as a condiment rather than an ingredient.

Balsamic vinegar is an artisan product. The best and driest is sourced from Modena where this highly prized exquisite product has been made in the attics of ancient buildings for centuries. New to this market, Villa Manodori, located in Modena, has been crafting very small quantities of its artisan balsamic vinegar for generations. It is made by first combining the juice of white trebbiano grapes with aged wine vinegar. This is followed by a series of yearly transfers to progressively smaller wooden barrels made of oak, chestnut or juniper over a period of 10 years or longer. It is this aging process that gives the vinegar its intense fruity aroma; dark, rich color; and perfect balance of sweetness and acidity.

During the years of aging, a significant 10 percent annual evaporation takes place leaving only a small amount of balsamic vinegar

at the end. This elevates the cost of each precious bottle.

Expensive products need authenticity. There are always imitators; some good, some bad. Prized balsamic vinegar, the really expensive bottlings, (\$82-\$160 for aged 20-40 year olds) can be recognized two ways. Bottles are never larger than 100mL and closed with an official wax seal from the Consortium of Producers of the Traditional Balsamic Vinegar of Modena. They are required to carry the phrase "aceto balsamico tradizionale di Modena" on the label.

If this was the only balsamic vinegar, most of us would never get to taste it, much less use it to enhance flavors of dishes. Here's where you need to know the good imitators. Villa Manodori qualifies because it is quite viscous. Its dark brown liquid coats the glass when the bottle is turned on its side. Secondly, its aroma and flavors match closely to certified balsamic vinegar.

If you wish to try other balsamic vinegars, you can make the costs-

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Irish whiskey says Erin go Bragh best

BY ELEANOR & RAY HEALD
SPECIAL WRITERS

In Gaelic, the Irish call it uisce beatha (ish-ke-bah'-hah), water of life. Americans call it Irish whiskey and consider it as much a part of St. Patrick's Day as shamrocks. Erin Go Bragh translates Ireland forever, and as long as there's Ireland, there will be Irish whiskey!

Before Prohibition, Irish whiskey was very popular with 400 brands registered in the United States. After repeal of Prohibition in 1933, it never regained that popularity. American GIs returning home from both World Wars favored Scotch whiskey and brought this taste preference back to the United States.

Spelling is the first difference between Irish and Scotch whiskeys. The Irish use the same spelling as American bourbon whiskey while the Scots drop the "e." The two spirits are dissimilar in aroma, taste and finish caused principally by three major factors:

- Barley used in traditional Irish whiskey is dried in enclosed kilns, not over a peat fire like the

barley for Scotch whiskey.

■ The Irish frequently use a blend of malted and unmalted barley while the Scots use only malted barley, thus the term "single malt." Single malt Irish whiskeys are superior to blends.

■ Scotch is doubly distilled while most Irish whiskey is triply distilled. Today, the rising tide of U.S. fascination for "things Irish," the proliferation of Irish pubs across America, coupled with a thousand years of tradition, have created an Irish whiskey revival. Last year, sales of Irish whiskey were up over 10 percent.

History

Between 500 and 600 A.D., Irish missionaries brought the distillation process to Ireland from the Middle East, where the alembic still was used for distilling perfumes. Scotch Irish monks found a better use for it when they invented uisce beatha and renamed the alembic a pot still.

In the 12th century, soldiers of King Henry II invaded Ireland and discovered its pleasures. Unable to pronounce the Gaelic

phrase, they coined the word "whiskey." Over time, little has changed in the techniques and basic ingredients: barley, grain, yeast and the purest water, used to produce Irish whiskey.

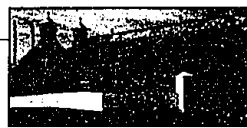
The world's oldest licensed distillery is in the village of Bushmills, County Antrim, about an hour's drive north of Belfast in Northern Ireland. History dates distillation at Bushmills to 1276, but it was not officially granted license until 1608 by James I of England.

Tasting guide

The following is a tasting guide for the available major Irish whiskey brands:

- Bushmills \$21 is a very good introduction to Irish whiskey. Aged a minimum of four years in American bourbon casks, it is floral, light, elegant and smooth with a complex taste.
- Black Bush \$31 appeals to cognac aficionados because of its flavor depth. Aging in Oloroso sherry butts gives it a darker color and significant nutty charac-

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Home to Irish whiskey: Bushmills Distillery in Northern Ireland is the world's oldest licensed distillery.

Wine Picks

- Pick of the Pack: 1995 R.H. Phillips Toasted Head Chardonnay \$15 and 1996 Meridian Vineyards Chardonnay, Edna Valley \$15. Both wines have dynamic flavors and a sensible price.
- No wine says spring like Sauvignon Blanc. Try: 1996 Richmond Sauvignon Blanc Reserve \$7; 1996 Fortan Sauvignon Blanc \$7.50, 1996 Chateau Ste. Michelle barrel fermented \$8; 1996 Colebrook Sauvignon Blanc \$18; 1996 Matanzas Creek Winery \$20. With sauvignons, higher price reflects more barrel influences.
- Big, bold chardonnays are great with lobster, monkfish, muskels and shrimp. Try: 1996 Clos du Bois Calceine Vineyard Chardonnay \$18; and 1996 Dry Creek Vineyard Reserve Chardonnay \$23.
- Go Port-Lidel Domestic ports have come of age. One of the best is 1988 Ficklin Vineyards Port \$25.
- Best buy at \$15 and under.
- 1997 Luis Philip Edwards Chardonnay, Chile \$8.
- 1996 Marquis de Chasse (white) \$7
- 1996 Hogue Chardonnay, Washington State \$9