

Why vinegar's back in vogue

Anna-Marie Julyan asks if it's time to reconsider this ancient ingredient – and why it's good for more than just sprinkling on your fish and chips

Let's be honest. How many bottles of vinegar are sitting unloved at the back of your kitchen cupboard? More than likely there's a malt for fish and chips, perhaps white wine vinegar for salad dressings and, of course, the ubiquitous balsamic. Goodness knows how long they've been there.

For years, vinegar has quite literally gathered dust, but stick your finger in the air and you might find the winds of change are starting to whistle through those kitchen cupboards. Food writer and historian Angela Clutton certainly believes so. She has 40 vinegars, which she uses regularly and which, moreover, live in their very own vinegar cupboard.

The cupboard lends its name to Clutton's first book, which recently won the 2018 Jane Grigson Trust Award for promising new food writers. Due to be published by Absolute Press in February, *The Vinegar Cupboard* pledges to teach modern cooks how to make the most of this ancient ingredient. For its ability to season, deglaze, reduce and add depth to its myriad variants, vinegar is worthy of reconsideration.

'A mixture of things make this a perfect moment for it,' says Clutton. 'There's a little bit of a kickback against sugary-sweet flavours and people looking for more balance, which vinegar provides. Fermenting has been a really interesting food trend and it is an aspect of that. There's a continued interest in food heritage and traditions, as well as cuisines from the Middle East and Far East. Vinegar magically sits in the middle of all those things.'

Taking it up a notch, food writer and former editor of *Jamie Magazine*



ROLL OUT THE BARRELS Andy Harris uses niche ingredients like lovage, right

Andy Harris has his very own vinegar shed. It's where he makes small batches of the stuff – everything from lovage to red wine or Sicilian mandarin vinegar.

Last year, he set up his business, Vinegar Shed, an online shop and wholesaler specialising in both his own creations and artisan vinegars sourced from around Europe. There are fruit-flavoured variants made by Cistercian nuns in the Languedoc and quince vinegar from the Dolomites, as well as oils and kitchenalia. Customers include chefs such as Jeremy Lee, Mitch Tonks and Nathan Outlaw.

'I love the diversity of vinegar,' says Harris. 'You can whip up a salad dressing, add it to an aioli, to a stew or daube, make an escabeche or drink a tot with water to aid digestion, which I advise with some of them. If I'm cooking fish, I'll add cider or Riesling vinegar in to deglaze the pan and maybe some crème



Tips for cooking with vinegar

Pair flavours the way you would with food, says Angela Clutton. For example, use cherry vinegar to deglaze the pan for fried duck breast, or sprinkle grilled peaches with Champagne vinegar.

Add as a seasoning to soups, stews or lentil dishes before serving, adds Clutton. Try



sherry vinegar for its depth of flavour and slight sweetness.

Taste the vinegar first and add a drop to any creamy sauce

for balance says Walnut Tree chef Shaun Hill.

The French know what they're talking about when it comes to cooking with vinegar, says Geraldene Holt, Jane Grigson Trust Award chair of judges.

Look up traditional dishes such as the delicious poulet au vinaigre, which is chicken cooked in a sauce made with reduced vinegar.

Photography: Getty Images, StockFood

They're made with infusions of fruit, herbs and apple cider vinegar, as well as sparkling water.

'It's what you drink when you're not drinking,' he explains. 'It has a sweet and sour taste as well as a savoury element from ingredients like juniper, sour cherry or basil. You sip – you don't glug, making it easy to drink with everyone else.'

The Romans mixed vinegar and water to make a drink called posca.

'When in the Bible it says that Jesus was given vinegar on the cross, it was a type of shrub; it was a generous thing to do,' adds Chevallier Guild.

The word vinegar comes from the French *vin aigre* meaning sour wine, but its beginnings are ancient and mysterious, lost to the annals of history. The Babylonians made vinegar from date wine, raisin wine and beer around 4000BC.

In truth, vinegar probably invented itself, because when alcoholic drink is exposed to the air, it naturally turns sour. Bacteria invade and use oxygen to metabolise alcohol, converting it to acetic acid. This strong antimicrobial agent is the ancient preservative we still use today.

In Britain, we have a tradition of malt vinegar originally known as *alegar*, made from unhopped beer, but within their own homes people used to make all manner of variants. Studying that history provided Clutton with the spark for her book idea.

'When you look at British cookbooks from the 1700s and 1800s you really see lots of recipes for interesting vinegars, then later on newer cookbooks talk in

I love the diversity of vinegar. Add it to an aioli, to a stew or daube, or drink a tot'

much more general terms,' she says. 'I wondered what we were losing by not having an elderflower or cucumber vinegar.'

Good Things In England, written by Florence White and published in 1932, for example, contains recipes on how to make vinegar from gooseberries, rhubarb and even primroses. 'So much changed in the way we think about food in the world wars,' explains Clutton. 'Now we're coming full circle and there are lovely producers out there making grain and fruit vinegars, and apple vinegar – they're coming back.'

There's certainly room for growth according to Waitrose vinegar buyer Oliver Chadwyck-Healey: 'We understand that vinegar has great potential and that's why we'll be relaunching our vinegar range at the end of the year.'

At the moment, balsamic makes up 55% of Waitrose vinegar sales followed by wine vinegars, cider and malt. 'Over the past 20 years everyone's got the balsamic bug,' says Andy Harris. 'But I want to preach about the virtues of small-batch wine and cider vinegars.' As chefs become enthused he hopes their ideas and creativity will filter down. 'They immediately find uses and are coming up with different ideas. I think it's the beginning of something,' he adds.

BEAUTIFUL BALSAMIC

Balsamic vinegar is widely used already but wine and cider vinegars are gaining in popularity

fraiche to make a sauce. They add layers and depth of flavour.'

Jamie Oliver's most recent cookbook, *5 Ingredients – Quick & Easy Food*, lists red wine vinegar as one of his five everyday staples. He describes it as 'a good all-rounder when it comes to acidity and balancing marinades, sauces and dressings'.

If our palates are craving something a little less sweet, then it's not just about

food, but also drink. Drinking vinegars, traditionally called shrubs, are fruit syrups preserved with vinegar and mixed with water or alcohol to make a tangy beverage. They've been appearing on trendy cocktail lists at places such as Dishoom and Dandelyan for a few years now. Cider and vinegar maker Henry Chevallier Guild of Aspall is launching a new brand of non-alcoholic drinks called Nonsuch Shrubs.

ACID TEST

Jamie Oliver recommends using vinegar



Know your vinegars – and when to use them



1 BALSAMIC
It makes a mellow dressing than wine vinegar, but look for ones that contain grape must. Try **Waitrose Aceto Balsamico Di Modena**, £15/250ml



2 CIDER VINEGAR
Made from yeast-fermented apple juice, and so contains apple aromas. Try **Willy's Bioganic Apple Cider Vinegar**, £6.95/500ml



3 RED WINE VINEGAR
This has a stronger and fuller flavour than white wine vinegar. Try **Aspall Cabernet Sauvignon Red Wine Vinegar**, £2.35/350ml



4 MALT VINEGAR
With malty overtones it's good for chutneys and ketchups as well as fish and chips. Try **Sarson's Original Malt Vinegar**, 70p/250ml



5 WHITE WINE VINEGAR
Most are light and crisp, although some can be very sharp. Try **Aspall Sauvignon Blanc White Wine Vinegar**, £2.35/350ml



6 SHERRY VINEGAR
Good with red meat and game. Try **Carbonell Sherry Vinegar**, £1.79/250ml

Fi Glover In my opinion



The BBC Radio 4 journalist airs her views

When deputy governor of the Bank of England Ben Broadbent used the term 'menopausal' to describe a stagnation in the UK economy, the sluice gates of the mid-life hormonal cliché lock were opened. He has since apologised. He used it in the context of something slowing down and becoming less productive. He said he was also trying to explain the word 'climacteric', which economists often use to make clear an economic stage at the end of one thing but not yet at the start of another. 'Climacteric' is a biological term which can apply to both genders. You might think that if you can't explain one unheard of term without using another provocative one, then maybe leave out the analogy altogether.

I think we can probably agree that Mr B won't be using the M-word again. He was left in no doubt that many women 'of a certain age' are really quite on the ball, very productive, sprightly of mind, funny and totally 'woke' – to use a phrase that all the millennials reading this will really key into. Quick, hand this to a millennial!

No I didn't know what woke meant either. I had to look it up because I was hearing it bandied around so much, and in order to avoid a repeat of the incident in a Tunisian

'Many women "of a certain age" are really quite on the ball, productive, sprightly of mind, funny and totally "woke"'

restaurant when my sister was choking and I offered to give her the 'hymen manoeuvre' I now try to understand the things I am saying. The OED definition of woke is 'well-informed, up-to-date... alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice'.

And woke has earned its place in the OED because so many millennials are aware of their social responsibility and they understand and reject prejudice. They are nothing like the stereotype of the earphone-dragging, game-thumbing, selfie-obsessed moron. I'm introducing it here as proof that the gap between stereotype and reality can be distressing and to add to my argument that Mr B is wrong to believe that the only menopausal experience is that of loss and negativity.

The most obvious thing about his slip-up is that he picked the wrong gender stereotype. If he was trying to say that we don't have the necessary skills for the next bit, we're clinging to our old ways and we've been a bit silly, spent too much money and not thought things through... well, isn't the UK having a classic male mid-life crisis? Pop that in your red sports car and feel the breeze rush through your hair.

Oh, the hair has gone has it? I'm so sorry. See how hurtful it is when you rely on a cliché?

@figlover

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