

herbs

with Jenny Somervell



Drizzled and Dredged

Since its inception last spring, my husband has been a regular buyer at the local Oxford Farmers' Market.

One of his first purchases there was a bottle of Minty Lime Vinaigrette dressing. Never slow to try something out, he drizzled it over fresh, steamed asparagus and served it up for tea that night with baked fish. Presto! A gourmet meal in a flash.

So, cooks and supporters of cooks, with

fresh herbs abounding, now is the time to capture the essence of herbs so you too can enjoy these fresh flavours all year.

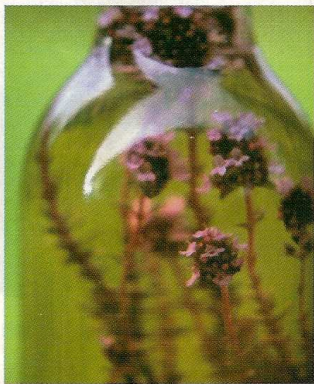
In my view, herbal vinegars produce the truest flavours with the least amount of work. In winter you will be pleased with your foresight when you just reach into the cupboard for the fresh taste of herbs, as if they were straight from the garden.

The alternative is not so alluring: dried

tarragon tastes like hay in comparison!

Herbal vinegars are incredibly versatile, but some people don't seem to know how to use them. Basically they can be used anywhere vinegar or lemon is indicated.

In our home they are the out-of-season staple for imparting subtle herb flavours into a simple vinaigrette dressing. They can also be added to mayonnaise, sauces and marinades, and used to baste grilled meat or poultry. Fruit vinegars add a



pleasant sharpness to pavlovas, meringues and even fruit salads. Flower vinegars make an interesting subtle flavouring for fruit and cream dishes. Preserved flowers left in the vinegar make a welcome garnish for winter salads.

Lemon thyme adds zest to mayonnaise, dill vinegar sharpens a dish of red or green cabbage, cucumber or fish. Tarragon vinegar with its tongue-tingling anise tang enlivens a cold chicken salad or hot gravy, and is a staple in bernaise sauce (see GT December, 2003). The leaves and flowers of purple basil turn vinegar lilac-pink and the strong clove flavour gives a bite to sharper salads. Salad burnet imparts a subtle fresh, nutty, cucumber taste which is appealing in salads. Shallots too, suit green salads, bringing a taste somewhere between garlic and chives.

Herbal flowers can impart

beautiful colours and also subtle flavourings. English lavender flowers will turn white wine vinegar lilac-pink, rose petals may be pink, red or yellow, nasturtiums produce a bright orange and anise hyssop a pretty pinkish-lavender.

Fruit vinegars are easily made and are an excellent old home remedy for coughs and colds – just dilute with hot water and sweeten with honey. They can be made with any soft fruit, herbal or otherwise: elderberries, raspberries, blackcurrants etc.

Even a semi-organised herb garden should have suitable leafy herbs growing abundantly at this time of year: basil, bay, dill, fennel, garlic, lemon balm, oregano, mint, rosemary, thyme and French tarragon to name a few.

To make a herbal vinegar only cider or wine vinegar (red or white) should be used; malt or distilled white vinegars are too harsh for the delicate herb flavours. Red wine vinegar suits stronger herb flavours: try chive flowers or chopped garlic and oregano.

Herb-infused oils are made in the same way as vinegars. They are often marketed commercially as an upmarket item in beautiful bottles but be cautious if making them at home. A couple of times when I have made them, a cloudy bacterial growth has started around the herbs. This is because, unlike vinegar, there is nothing in the oil to inhibit micro-organisms, except any antimicrobial activity in the herbs themselves.

Given this, it is possibly best to infuse

oil for immediate use or soon after but don't let this put you off. The subtle rich flavour can transform simple food.

One of our favourites is basil-infused oil, which Ken uses to stir-fry veges or to drizzle over them on serving. Like vinegars, they are useful in marinades, and also for basting grilled and roasted meat, fish and vegetables.

The same principles and method apply as for vinegars. The oils can be heated gently to 45-48°C, though some of the herb scent is likely to be lost. A gentler method is to store the jar on a warm window sill for two weeks, shaking and stirring at least once a day. Taste, and if the flavour is sufficient, strain and bottle. If not, repeat the process.

Any oil can be used but strongly flavoured oils should be avoided. A mild olive oil or a good quality sunflower or safflower oil is ideal. A sweet oil can be made using almond oil with scented flowers.

But one of the best parts of making vinegars and oils is experimenting: the flavour combinations are endless.

To make herbal vinegars

- Use clean, dry, freshly picked herbs. Bruise herbs and pack into a wide-mouthed, sterilised jar.
- Pour vinegar over herbs to fill the jar and cap with an acid-proof lid (not metal). Vinegar can be warmed gently – never hot as it will evaporate the volatile herb oils. Steep for 2-3 weeks in a cool, dark place.
- Test for flavour. If a stronger flavour is required, strain vinegar and repeat with fresh herbs.
- Strain through a fine sieve (such as a coffee filter) into decorative bottles. Decorate each with a sprig of herbs, seeds, flowers peppers or citrus peels.

NOTE: Use an enamel or stainless steel pan for heating vinegar. Sterilise infusing jar and storage bottle by: a) Immersing in boiling water for 10 minutes or b) Heating in the oven at 120°C for 15 minutes. Store vinegars in a cool dark place and use within 6 months.

Herbs For Vinegars

Lemon balm	Nasturtium (buds, flowers, unripe seeds)
Thyme	Shredded horseradish
Marjoram	Garlic (bruised)
Fennel	Shallots (chopped)
French tarragon	Dill (use unripe seed heads and leaves)
Savory	Mint

Flowers For Vinegars

Carnations	Elderflowers
Clover	Lavender (English)
Nasturtium	Rose petals
Rosemary flowers	Sweet violets
Thyme flowers	

Flavour suggestions:

Floral Vinegars

Use the same method as for savoury vinegars:
Lavender flowers & lemon verbena (1:1)
Lavender flowers & rose petals (1:3)

Vinegars Using Leaves and Seeds

Basil, coriander & chilli (small, whole, red)
Tarragon & lemon balm (1:2)
Basil & salad burnet (1:2)
Mint & chives with whole black peppercorns & thin slices of chilli
Oregano & garlic
Thyme or lemon thyme with curls of lemon peel
Tarragon, basil, chives (part each): lemon thyme & salad burnet (2 parts each): 1 clove garlic
Crushed seed of anise, caraway, celery, coriander, cumin, dill, salad burnet (1 part each): 1 clove garlic

Sweet Elderberry Vinegar

1.5 kg elderberries
1.5 litres wine vinegar
soft brown sugar

Crush elderberries in a deep bowl. Pour vinegar over, cover and leave until ready (5-10 days), stirring now and then. Strain off liquid and discard fruit. Add 350g sugar for every 600ml liquid and dissolve gently over a low heat. Finally, boil rapidly for 10 minutes, remove scum and bottle. Drink diluted with hot water for coughs & colds, or just for health! A useful flavouring for fruit fillings, steamed pudding or sweet pies. This recipe will make any soft fruit vinegar.



Above: Suitable flowers for vinegar, anti-clockwise from left, elderflower, English lavender, chive, rosemary, thyme, rose petals.

Far left: Herbs steeping in wine vinegar, from left to right, rose, elderflower and rosemary, lemon thyme and French tarragon.

From Mary Browne: 'The Cook's Garden':

Clove pinks & rosemary (1 part each): rose petals & elderflowers (2 parts each)

Decorative ideas:

- Spirals of lemon /orange peel
- Chilli peppers
- Whole flowers (lavender, anise hyssop, clove pinks)
- Petals (borage, nasturtium, rose)

'Flavours of Asia'

Combine rau ram (Vietnamese mint or *Polygonum odoratum*), purple perilla or shiso (*Perilla frutescens*), garlic chives (leaves and flowers), 3 slices of crushed fresh ginger and a sliced shallot with unseasoned rice vinegar. ■

● Jenny Somervell is a long-time herbal nurserywoman and gardener and loves to experiment with herbs on her North Canterbury block.



Tarragon Mussels

1-2 dozen fresh cooked mussels
2 tomatoes per dozen mussels
1/4 cup chopped parsley
1/4 cup olive oil
2 tbsp tarragon vinegar
1 tbsp lemon juice
1/4 cup fresh tarragon
Black pepper, freshly ground

Chop tomatoes and drain. Combine tomatoes, parsley, oil, vinegar, lemon juice, finely chopped tarragon and black pepper. Pour over mussels and chill for at least one hour. Serve at room temperature.