
Feeding and Building Your Vinegar

Luxury Vinegars · fig season, and the road to the casks

You do not move up because time passed. You move up when the vinegar is strong enough to carry the new volume.

Every vinegar in this series climbs the same ladder. A quart becomes a half gallon, a half gallon becomes a gallon, and a gallon eventually earns its place in a cask. The steps are the same at every rung. Only the amounts change.

The ladder

Vessel	Feed amount	Wait before next feed	Ready to move up when
1 quart			
2 quart			
1 gallon			

Fill these in as you go. The feed amounts and the ready signal are written in during the video, because they belong to your own vinegar rather than to a chart. Note yours here and this page becomes your record for the whole build.

Two things nobody warns you about

- A bigger jar means more surface and more air. That is exactly what you want. Do not fill to the shoulder. Acetobacter needs the headspace to breathe.
- A mother grown in a quart will not cover the surface of a gallon, and it will look wrong for a while. It re-forms at the new size. Nothing has gone wrong.

The cover on your jar

Use butter muslin, not cheesecloth. This is not fussiness.

A fruit fly does not come through the weave. She lays her eggs on the outside, and the eggs and new larvae are a fraction of a millimetre across. Those come straight through grade 10 cheesecloth. And a fermenting vinegar is the strongest attractant in your house, because acetic acid and ethanol together is exactly what she is built to find.

The cost of cheesecloth is pets you did not ask for. And they do not stay in the jar. Egg to adult is about a week in a warm kitchen, and one female lays hundreds.

Already bought cheesecloth? Fold it to eight layers. Or use a coffee filter, or a scrap of clean old cotton sheet. Nobody needs to buy anything to carry on today.

If something did get in, you will not see flies. You will see tiny pale larvae at the surface or sitting in the mother.

Fig Vinegar

Luxury Vinegars · make it while the figs are here

Figs are in for about three weeks and then gone until next year. That is the whole reason this one starts big while the wine and raisin vinegars started small. You scale to what the season gives you, not to what a recipe says.

Choose your vessel honestly

Vessel size is not ambition. It is what you have: enough fruit, and enough mother to carry it.

Strong mother and more figs than you know what to do with? Go up. Young mother, or a punnet from the market? A quart is exactly right, and it will be just as good, only less of it. The vinegar does not know how big the jar is.

Too much fruit against too little mother is how a batch goes to mould instead of vinegar. That is the only reason the gate exists.

A quart of good vinegar beats a gallon of spoiled fruit.

For one gallon of finished vinegar

- 4 to 5 lb very ripe figs, stems off, roughly crushed. A blend of varieties gives a more developed flavour than any single one.
- About 3 quarts filtered, non-chlorinated water. Note this is not a full gallon of water: the fruit brings its own volume, and you need headspace.
- Cane sugar to taste the must, roughly 5 to 9 oz. Very ripe figs may need almost none.
- 2 to 3 cups raw live vinegar, plus an active mother.
- Optional: a pinch of wine or champagne yeast for a more reliable first fermentation.

Why the sugar is lower than most recipes online

Ripe figs already carry most of the sugar you need. Add a full pound on top and the must ferments out near 12 percent alcohol, which is above what acetobacter will tolerate. You get a lovely fig wine that sits there for eight weeks and refuses to turn.

You are aiming for a starting gravity around 1.050 to 1.060, which lands you at 6 to 8 percent alcohol. A hydrometer costs a few dollars and turns this from hoping into knowing.

Most recipes on the internet were copied, not calculated. Check the sugar before you trust the page.

First fermentation, 7 to 14 days

1. Crush the figs well and put them in a clean wide mouth vessel.
2. Dissolve the sugar in a little warm water, add it with the rest of the water, and leave several inches of headspace.

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3. Add the yeast now if you are using it. The mother does not go in yet.
 4. Cover with butter muslin and leave at room temperature.
 5. Stir daily with a clean utensil, pushing the floating fruit back under.

You are looking for bubbling and a fruity, wine-like smell. This stage makes the alcohol your mother will turn into vinegar.

Then the mother, 4 to 8 weeks

1. When the bubbling has mostly slowed, strain the fruit out thoroughly.
2. Move the liquid to a clean jar or crock and add the mother with its starter vinegar.
3. Cover with cloth. Never seal it. The bacteria need oxygen.
4. Keep it warm and out of direct sun. A pale jelly-like layer forming on top is a good sign.

Fig Vinegar, continued

Knowing when it is done

Taste at about four weeks. It should no longer be sweet or winey. It should smell sharp, fruity and deeply of figs.

If you plan to bottle it, gift it, or use it anywhere that depends on acidity, test the finished batch with an acid titration kit. Four percent is a sensible target for culinary vinegar.

Please read this one

Do not use homemade vinegar for shelf stable canning unless a tested recipe allows it and you have measured the acidity. Homemade vinegar varies far more than it tastes like it does.

The luxury finish

Hold back a few perfect figs. Once the vinegar is finished and strained, steep it with halved fresh figs for five to seven days in the refrigerator, then strain again and bottle. That gives a brighter fresh fig perfume without leaving fruit in the pantry bottle.

This adds a little sugar and water back to a finished vinegar, so keep those bottles cold and use them. They are not a shelf stable gift unless you retest the acidity after straining.

It would be lovely with a few black peppercorns, a strip of lemon peel or a single bay leaf. I would make the first batch plain. Let the figs have their moment before you invite the spice cabinet to the party.

Moving to the Cask

Luxury Vinegars · where all of this is going

This is the last rung, and most of us are not there yet. Build first. The cask will still be there.

Why wood

- It breathes. A little water and alcohol pass out through the staves, so the vinegar slowly concentrates. That is where body comes from.
- It gives. Oak lends vanilla, spice and tannin, and tannin is what makes a vinegar taste round instead of sharp.
- It lets in a trace of oxygen continuously, which drives the slow reactions that turn harsh acetic bite into something complex.

How much you actually need

A cask should be filled to about two thirds or three quarters. Not to the top: the headspace is deliberate, because the bacteria need air. This is the opposite of wine, and it is the single thing people get wrong when they carry barrel advice across from wine or whiskey.

Do the arithmetic before you buy

- Two thirds to three quarters of whatever cask you have.
- A 3 litre cask needs about 2 litres. A 5 litre cask needs about 3.5. A 10 litre cask needs about 7.
- One gallon is under 4 litres. If you are working in gallon jars, a 10 litre cask is close to two full gallons of finished vinegar. That is why we feed and build for months before anything goes into wood.

Toasted or untoasted

- Untoasted gives the wood straight: tannin, a green woody note, sometimes coconut or fresh sawn timber. Tannin is structure. It gives it up fast, so a small cask can turn astringent if you are not paying attention.
- Toasted has had its own sugars and lignin broken down by heat, which is where vanilla, caramel and baking spice come from. It also burns off some raw green tannin, so the result is softer and sweeter.

Delicate and fruity goes untoasted: fig, raspberry, apple, white wine. Bold or already dark goes toasted: red wine, raisin, anything heading toward a balsamic character.

If you will only ever own one, medium toast is the more forgiving choice.

Preparing a New Cask

Do this before you have vinegar ready, not after. It takes longer than you think.

A new cask arrives dry. The staves have shrunk in storage, so it will leak, and the raw wood inside is at its harshest. Both of those are fixed before any vinegar goes near it.

Swelling, 1 to 2 days

1. Fill the cask with cool water and leave it. It will weep at the seams almost immediately. That is expected.
2. Top up as the level drops. Stand it somewhere the drips do not matter.
3. Check at 24 hours, and again at 48. The weeping should slow and then stop as the staves swell and close against each other.
4. Empty it and rinse with hot water. Never soap, not once. Oak is porous and soap residue in the wood is permanent.

If it is still dripping steadily after two full days, do not put vinegar in it. Refill and give it another day. A cask that will not seal is a conversation with whoever sold it to you, not a problem to work around.

Seasoning, 1 to 2 weeks. Optional but recommended

Fill the cask with inexpensive store bought vinegar, leave it a week or two, then pour that off and discard it.

Raw new oak is at its most aggressive on the first fill, and this takes the hard edge off so your own vinegar is not the batch that pays for it. It matters most on an untoasted cask, which has the most green tannin to give up. Skip it if you would rather not wait, but taste that first fill early and often.

Filling it

1. Fill to two thirds with finished, strong vinegar. Wood is for aging, not fermenting. A weak vinegar can spoil in a cask, so this wants to be at least as strong as anything you would bottle, and five percent is a safer floor for the cask than four.
2. Cover the bung hole with cloth so air gets in and flies stay out.

Living With Your Cask

A cask is not a jar you happen to have made of wood.

Two things to know before you buy one

- Once a cask is in service it stays in service. An empty cask dries out, the staves shrink, and it will leak or go musty. Wood is a commitment in a way a jar is not.
- You top up rather than empty. Draw off what you need and feed it to replace what you took. This cask never gets emptied. It just gets older.

And taste it. A small cask is not a small barrel. High surface area against low volume means fast evaporation and fast oak extraction, so a 10 litre cask can over-oak in months where a large barrel takes years. Taste monthly and pull it off the wood when it tastes right, not when the calendar says so.

Something has gone wrong if

- The seams are still wet once it has been in service a while. It never fully swelled.
- It smells of solvent or nail polish. The vinegar went in before it was finished.
- It tastes flat, dusty and woody rather than round. It has been on the oak too long.
- It smells musty or of damp cellar. That is the wood, not the vinegar, and it usually means it sat empty at some point.

The Words, and What They Actually Mean

Nobody is born knowing what a stave is.

The cask itself

Cooper	The person who builds barrels. Cooperage is both the craft and the workshop.
Stave	One of the shaped wooden planks that make up the curved side of the cask.
Hoop	The metal band that squeezes the staves together and holds the whole thing shut.
Head	The flat round end of the cask.
Bung hole	The opening in the side. In wine it takes a solid stopper called a bung. In vinegar we cover it with cloth instead, because the bacteria still need air.
Swelling	Soaking a new or dried out cask with water so the wood expands and the seams close.
Seasoning	Filling the cask with something sacrificial first, to pull the harshest raw wood character out before your own vinegar goes in.
Char	Wood burned until the surface is blackened. Not the same as toasting, and far more aggressive. Casks for vinegar are toasted, never charred.

What the wood gives up

Lignin	The stiff structural compound in wood. Heat breaks it down, and that is where vanilla and baking spice notes come from.
Vanillin	The specific compound behind the vanilla note in toasted oak. The same molecule as vanilla flavouring.
Tannin	The compound that makes strong tea and young red wine feel drying in your mouth. Untoasted oak has more of it ready to give.
Extraction	The general word for the cask handing its character over to whatever is inside it.

The Words, continued

Vinegar terms

Acetic acid	The acid that makes vinegar vinegar. Its percentage is the acidity you measure.
Acetification	The stage where alcohol turns into acetic acid. This is the part that needs air.
Acetobacter	The bacteria doing that work. They need oxygen, which is why every vessel in this series is covered with cloth and never sealed.
Mother	The gelatinous mat of cellulose and bacteria that forms on the surface. A working colony, not a fault.
Must	The sweet unfermented liquid before the yeast gets to it.
Starting gravity	A hydrometer reading that tells you how much sugar is in the must, and therefore how much alcohol it will make.
Titration	The test that gives you acidity as an actual number instead of a guess.
Headspace	The air between the surface of the liquid and the top of the vessel. Wanted at every stage of vinegar, jar and cask alike. This is the opposite of wine.
Solera	A system where you draw off part of a batch and top it back up, so old and new keep blending and nothing ever starts from zero. This is how the cask works.
Racking	Moving liquid off its sediment into a clean vessel.
Butter muslin	The close weave cloth used to cover fermenting vessels. Cheesecloth is too open and lets fruit flies lay eggs straight through it.

Cask Log

One sheet per cask. Small casks move quickly, so the log is the whole skill.

Cask (circle one): TOASTED / UNTOASTED

Size:

What went in:

Acidity at fill:

Date swelled:

Date seasoned:

Date filled:

Taste monthly from:

Tasting and topping up

Date	How it tastes	Wood: light / right / too much	Topped up

When two tastings in a row tell you the wood is right, that is your signal. Draw off what you want to use and top the cask back up. Waiting one more month is how good vinegar turns woody.