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Making Homemade Grape Syrup

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I never knew it had a name. Every year I make a syrup from a vine of deep, blue-black Worden grapes that grows on our arbor. This is incredibly simple to do. I pick all the grapes (more than enough to fill a five-gallon bucket), wash them and put them in two large stockpots, stems and all. Then I set them on the stove over medium heat, and they immediately release their juice.

After an hour or so the skins have shriveled, and much of the liquid has been reduced. I strain out the pomace (the stems, skins and seeds), first in a colander, then in a fine strainer, pressing with a big spoon to get out all the juice. The pomace goes onto the compost pile, and the juice goes back on the stove to reduce further, until it is thick enough to coat the back of a spoon. Then I freeze or can it in half-pint jars. It's tart, but I leave it unsweetened so that I can adjust the sweetness later, according to the syrup's use.

If I'm just adding a bit to the apples in an apple pie, for extra flavor, I might leave it as is. But usually I'll add some sugar or honey and reduce it a bit more, then let it cool, especially if I'm going to pour it over vanilla ice cream. And that, along with some late ever-bearing raspberries, is exactly the way I served it to my friend Max.

"This is called mosto d'uva!" he exclaimed. "Grape must. It's a specialty of Emilia-Romagna [the region] in northern Italy." And so it was. Prowling the image banks on the Web, I saw it being boiled, bottled, drizzled over fruit, yogurt, custard or cheese, sprinkled onto meats, made into murky, flour-thickened puddings, sipped in small glasses and -- wait -- poured into bathtubs, where near-naked women lay barely submerged.

Am I the last to hear about vinotherapy? This newly popular spa treatment involves immersion in, or slathering with, mashed-up grapes, to imbue one's skin with youth-preserving polyphenols. My idea of vinotherapy is opening a nice bottle of Cotes du Rhone and applying polyphenols from within. But I am happy that there are so many uses for my tasty little home product. I've tried it on lamb chops and on pork belly. Delicious! Next I want to dot it on fresh figs.

If I were more ambitious I might turn it into balsamic vinegar the way they do in Modena (again, in Emilia-Romagna), allowing it to ferment sequentially in barrels of diminishing size, each made from a different wood. After 75 years I'd have something unbelievably special. But mosto d'uva, two hours off the vine, is pretty damn nice. I once bought it in a bottle, under the name of "saba," but it is was not as intense as my home brew -- which is always on hand, along with a quart of ice cream, for a sweet ending to a meal.

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