Published on *Kitchen Gardeners International* (http://kgi.org)

Sour Grapes: Making Vinegar At Home

Fri, 12/17/2010 - 08:57 -- Peter

(Crossposted from cookblog [1]).

What is it that finally pushes us over the edge, and motivates us to try something new? Even when it?s something we?re pretty sure is easy and know is rewarding, it can be a real effort to begin a new venture. I?m speaking culinarily, but it?s true across all the areas of human endeavor. There?s a resistance?a fear even?that keeps us returning to the things we know. I try to overcome it regularly, and this here forum offers some incentive to mix things up and stretch out beyond the comfort zone, but sometimes there?s a long period of time that elapses before things click and I take on a new project. And there?s still more effort required to incorporate the technique into the rhythms of kitchen routine (I?m looking at you, bread-baking) so that the food in question can enter the regular rotation, truly substituting for store-bought alternatives.

In my erratic but still determined progress to outsource less and less of my food production, lately I?ve been dabbling in making vinegar. I first got serious about it when I visited Brother Victor-Antoine [2] in June to profile him for the magazine (profile at the link). His vinegar is revelatory. Seek it out if you live in the area. He sent me home with a jar of mother (mother = a colony of bacteria and soluble cellulose that forms over time and converts alcohol to acetic acid. Acetic acid = vinegar) and it sat in my cabinet until I bought a bottle of wine that had turned to vinegar. At that same time, the biodynamic fruit CSA I had joined started including apple cider in the weekly deliveries. Faced with two half gallons, I could have frozen one, but opted instead to let it ferment. And thus a bad bottle of wine and a good bottle of cider began my zealous experimentation with homemade vinegar.

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From left to right: Apple cider, red wine (needs topping up), sumac-maple, blackcurrant, cranberry-strawberry.

I began by adding another bottle of drinkable red wine to the spoiled one in a half-gallon jar, dropping in a glistening loogie of mother for good measure. Once the cider was fully fizzy and noticeably alcoholic, I added mother to it as well. Because it was summer, I covered both jars with a few layers of cheesecloth and secured it with rubber bands so the fruit flies couldn?t get in. It?s important to keep the vinegar-to-be exposed to air, so don?t close the containers.

And then? Then I did nothing. That?s it. The entire process. By Thanksgiving, the red wine was pungent and ripe. I decanted about half of it, and topped the jar up with another bottle of decent, inexpensive wine. I use it in everything. It?s glorious; the basic house vinaigrette for salads is now a thing of ecstasy-inducing

wonder. The cider isn?t ready yet, but keep in mind that half of my initial wine jar was already vinegar when I began. The waiting is the hardest part.

The act of decanting and topping up the wine got me inspired, so I took a little trip to a nearby wine store. I bought a bottle of local white and a bottle of New Jersey cranberry wine, and on my way home I pulled over at a spot I like and cut five plump sumac panicles. Once home, phase two of vinegar madness got underway. First, I pulled apart the sumac bobs and put all the fuzzy red drupes in the blender with water and let it fly. Linda wrotethis good post [3] about extracting sumac for anyone interested in trying it as an ingredient. It has tons of vitamin C, and when sweetened a bit makes a pretty interesting local citrus substitute. I like to combine it with maple, since I find that they complement each other famously, and since maple syrup is a local sweetener it makes sense from a foodshed point of view as well. The next day, after infusing overnight, I strained it first through a mesh strainer and then through fine muslin; those tiny hairs make for a cloudy result without filtration. I mixed it with enough maple syrup to bring it to a tolerable tartness, then added the bottle of white wine and enough vodka to bring the whole volume up to about 12% alcohol. In went some mother. I?m hopeful that maple-sumac vinegar will become a unique staple in my pantry.

The cranberry wine went in a smaller jar, along with a bottle of local strawberry wine that someone brought as a gift a while ago. And last, a store nearby has begun to carry blackcurrant juice from Connecticut. It?s not organic, though the farm uses Integrated Pest Management, and from experience I know that currants are a hardy and pest-resistant plant so they probably don?t spray too much. I?ll be looking into it. And it?s from the Northeast, and I think currants should be planted and consumed by everyone. So I bought a half a gallon, and let it ferment like the cider did. My trick, such as it is, is to leave it in the fridge until the plastic bottle begins to bloat from the CO2 that the yeast produces along with alcohol. I always drink a little at this stage, because the gentle effervescence is pleasant. It?s also fun to taste the decline in sugar as it all gets consumed and converted to booze. After it?s fully fermenting, I move it out to the counter, where the increased temperature speeds it up. Then I add mother and wait. See a pattern?

If you have access to the apple cider vinegar ?with the mother? that they sell at health food stores, you can use that. Over time, it grows, so you can divide it among more and more jars. If not, buy a bottle of wine, open it, and leave it on the counter for a month or two. When it smells and tastes like vinegar, it is. You can use a splash to inoculate other varieties, if you like, or just keep decanting some and adding more wine to turn. ?Vin aigre? means ?Sour wine,? after all. Nature does this for you. It?s probably the easiest homemade delicacy there is: easier than pickles, and that?s saying something.

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