

Editor's Note: Using a blend of words and visuals, this series explores unique communities and reveals the heart of China through food, architecture, craftsmanship, landscapes and traditions.

BEHIND THE SHANXI AGED VINEGAR

MORE THAN JUST SOUR

Mature vinegar industry follows ancient methods but adds a modern twist

LOCATION

Qingxu county, Taiyuan city, Shanxi province, known as the "Chinese Vinegar Capital", is the birthplace of authentic Shanxi old vinegar.



OLD STYLE PROCESS

To make Shanxi aged vinegar more authentic, the production process, which dates back more than 3,000 years, must go through at least five stages. The vinegar is made purely by natural fermentation without any chemical catalysts.

The vinegar is made from sorghum, barley and other raw materials.



Sorghum



Barley

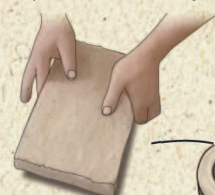
01 STEAM

The sorghum is crushed into 4 to 6 cloves, preferably without flour. The raw materials are ground into a powder and mixed with water for steaming. Sorghum grains are steamed for 1.5 to 2 hours to make sure they are thoroughly cooked.

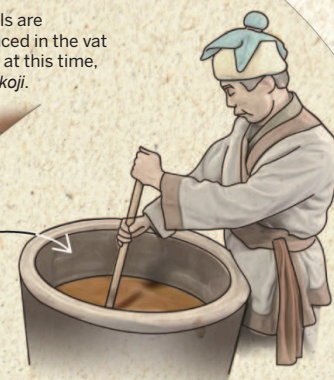


02 FERMENTATION

After the raw materials are steamed, they are placed in the vat for fermentation, and at this time, *daqu* is added to mix *koji*.



Daqu (compressed)



3 days



Semi-solid alcohol fermentation in open containers

15 days



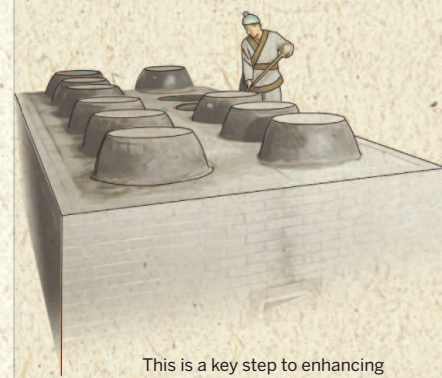
Solid acetic acid fermentation in sealed containers



The vinegar culture is a daily task. Copper fingerstalls make the work easier.

03 SMOKING

Smoked fermentation takes place in a special oven for smoking. The color of smoked pasta gradually darkens due to the high temperature and eventually turns black and purple, which is why it is often called "black paste".



This is a key step to enhancing the color, fragrance and flavor.

04 LEACHING

The purpose of pouring vinegar is to extract the vinegar from the vinegar paste. Poured vinegar is called smoked vinegar or crude vinegar, which is a semi-finished product of old vinegar.



05 AGING

Aged vinegar must have an aging process, and the name aged vinegar is derived from this. New vinegar is placed on the patio and steamed to remove a lot of water after exposure to summer to increase the vinegar concentration.

At least 1 year



Each container of vinegar is a little more than a meter high.

By ZHU XINGXIN and ZHANG LI in Taiyuan, Shanxi

When it comes to Chinese cuisine, high-quality vinegar provides a distinctive zing that can turn a dish into a prized part of the nation's cultural heritage.

Qingxu county in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, has been a concentrated production area of high-quality sorghum since ancient times, and craft workshops that produce vinegar from it are everywhere. The mature vinegar made here was well-known far and wide and carried by Shanxi merchants during the successive Ming and Qing dynasties from 1368 to 1911.

The work is done mostly by hand to this day.

In 2006, the county's brewing technique was included on the first national-level intangible cultural heritage list.

Inside a workshop at Shanxi's Shuita Vinegar Co, which was built in ancient architectural style, employees dressed in Ming Dynasty clothing are busy performing traditional vinegar brewing tasks, such as hand milling, fermentation and filtration.

"They are not actors but real workers," said Zhang Ce, general manager. "With the rapid development of the company, our customers have shown interest in knowing how the aged vinegar is made, as well as its cultural background."

A vinegar industry cluster led by three major enterprises — Zilin Vinegar, Shuita Vinegar Co, and Meijin Vinegar — has formed. Leveraging these enterprises, a key laboratory for vinegar fermentation science and engineering has been established in Shanxi.

In the Shuita workshop, 190 fermentation tanks are lined up like soldiers.

"Both fermentation and smoking can be achieved without human intervention. We integrate 5G technology for digital control," Zhang said.

All the elements in mature vinegar must meet exacting standards. While the vinegar is fermented by machine, it still goes through the traditional aging process, so its flavor is not altered.

Still, in recent years, the vinegar industry has been adapting to the times. While staying true to its roots, it has embraced innovation and introduced enticing new flavors.

In Shuita's production exhibition area, various types of vinegar are maturing. They range in acidity from a few percentages to more than 10 percentages and appear as products such as boxed vinegar paste, vinegar-soaked garlic and health vinegar packaged as oral liquid.

With a total of 81 vinegar-related enterprises, the annual vinegar production in Qingxu county is close to 800,000 metric tons. The industry provides jobs for nearly 100,000 people. The county, vigorously developing its vinegar industry, has formed the Vinegar Industry Development Alliance. In addition, a vinegar industry development fund has been set up.

The mature vinegar produced in Shanxi so far has been exported to 36 countries and regions, including the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan.

Wang Jianfeng, secretary of the Qingxu County Party Committee, said the county will focus on nurturing downstream support industries, such as glass bottles, plastic containers, paper packaging, commercial trading and logistics to meet the diverse demands of vinegar consumers. "We will continue to strengthen leading enterprises, extend the industry chain, build brands and make the vinegar industry a key pillar industry that drives the high-quality development of the entire county," Wang said.

Shanxi aged vinegar is world famous for its brown-red color, sour taste, fragrance, mellowness and thickness.

Newly made vinegar has a light color and thin consistency. As the years go by it becomes thicker and darker.

1 year



10 years

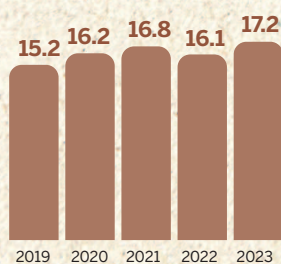


30 years



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Vinegar industry revenue\* (100 million yuan)



\* Statistics for enterprises above designated size

Nutrients and effects of Shanxi vinegar

- Rich in organic acids, promoting digestion, enhancing appetite and preventing constipation
- Contains amino acids and trace elements, which have the effect of supplementing nutrition
- Reduces blood sugar levels and cholesterol by stimulating the secretion of insulin
- Antibacterial and anti-inflammatory ingredients and can prevent colds, intestinal diseases and other illnesses

THE EFFECT OF VINEGAR ON FOOD

Knife-cut noodles

Knife-cut noodles with Shanxi aged vinegar can not only increase the sourness of the whole dish, but also make it more sweet and delicious, giving diners a lingering aftertaste.



Dumplings

Dumplings dipped in vinegar are more flavourful because in the process of fermenting of grains into vinegar, a large number of umami and aroma substances are produced.



Ice cream with vinegar

Ice cream with vinegar tastes a bit like chocolate at first, but more layered with the aftertaste. You can smell the fragrance of aged vinegar. This is the charm of aged vinegar.



Vinegar moon cakes

Vinegar not only adds a different flavor to the moon cakes themselves, but has also redefined the traditional moon cake with good taste and health.



Vinegar fish

Vinegar fish is a local traditional dish. It can replenish the nutrients needed by the human body, replenishing qi and blood.



Tangyuan

Tangyuan uses the sourness of old vinegar to relieve the sweetness and greasy feeling of food served during the Lantern Festival.

