

limoncello:

sunshine in a bottle

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I FIND IT A DELIGHTFUL PARADOX that as our days shorten and the cold harshness of a northern winter arrives, citrus season unfolds – a welcome reminder that warm, sun-drenched days will indeed return.

There are endless ways to enjoy citrus, but a delightful option for capturing and extending the citrus season is to transform the fruit into a delicious elixir employing the simple art of infusion. The result is a divine liqueur, such as Italy's gift to the world: limoncello - pure sunshine in a bottle.

As with most culinary treasures attributed to specific regions of the world, the origin of limoncello is fiercely debated and recipes, traditions and procedures vary greatly. A few things, however, are commonly agreed upon.

Italy: Whether it originated in Capri, Sorrento or Amalfi, limoncello is undisputedly a product of southern Italy, the result of inventive, resourceful and frugal Italians capitalizing on the region's sumptuous lemon crops. Legends abound over its exact origins, including the widely popular tale that limoncello was born in the early 1900's on the island of Azzurra in a post-war bar owned by the nephew of the lady Maria Antonia Farace who cared for a robust garden of lemons and oranges. Other stories are shared up and down the Amalfi coast, including limoncello's creation inside a monastic convent in order to "delight" the monks between their prayers. Despite the conflict around its historical roots, all agree that a nip of chilled limoncello is a beautiful and hospitable way to end a meal.

Lemons: Organic. Zest only; avoid the pith! The favored lemon used in the production of traditional limoncello is *the limone di Sorrento* – lemon of Sorrento - grown in a protected geographical region of Italy. Sorrento lemons are difficult to acquire in the United States, but luckily a wide variety of lemons can be transformed into delicious limoncello. A particular favorite for home-crafted limoncello is the slightly sweet and fragrant Meyer lemon.

The bright refreshing flavor (and color) of good limoncello is the direct result of pulling out the very essence of the citrus present in the thin outer layer of zest. Once you get close to the pith – the white portion of the peel just below the colored zest – you enter the bitter zone. Since only the outer layer is used, it is understandable that organic fruit is preferred in order to avoid unwanted chemicals leaching into the final product.



Neutral Spirits: Steeping in alcohol releases the lemon oil from the zest, resulting in brilliantly yellow, lemony infusion. Simple syrup is then added, turning the infusion into its final incarnation - limoncello. Many "traditional" recipes call for a high-octane neutral spirit such as grain alcohol, but a personal preference is a nice, smooth 80-proof vodka like Pittsburgh's own Boyd and Blair Potato Vodka. This smooth, slightly sweet potato vodka and the lower 80 proof make for a luscious "cello" without the burn of those made with cheaper, higher octane grain-based booze.

Specific recipes for making limoncello are even more varied than stories of its history. Families pass down closely guarded techniques but the overall traditional formula is remarkably basic: lemon zest, alcohol and simple syrup. Steeping times vary from a few days to several months when the resulting infusion is mixed with a basic simple syrup of water and sugar. The final result should be a smooth limoncello with a slightly sweet, bright crisp lemony flavor and a slight kick at the end.

Our limoncello recipe has been made time and again with exceptional results. The beauty is it takes only days rather than months to make so you have plenty of time to prepare a batch (or few) and share a little sunshine in a bottle with others this holiday season. Salute!

ABOUT OUR LIMONCELLO BOTTLE:

Hand-crafted limoncello is the perfect gift, especially if given in a bottle as gorgeous as the one made by Drew Hine specifically for our photo shoot. This bottle is a show-stopping example of the vivid colors and sleek, modern shapes that epitomize Drew's creations.

Drew and his wife Jeannine live in Pittsburgh's South Side where they run Vessel Studio, a private glassblowing shop. For information on the studio, lessons and custom commissions, visit vesselstudios.net.

ABOUT CITRUS:

In the United States, citrus fruits typically come into season October through March. Look for "product of USA" in your local grocer or order from online sources such as LocalHarvest.com.

Select organic fruit with smooth, unblemished skin and a heavy feel, indicating a fresher, juicier fruit.

ABOUT LIMONCELLO:

Limoncello will mellow the longer it sits, so if possible, be patient.

For an equally delicious alternative to limoncello, substitute clementines, Cara Cara, or blood oranges for the lemons.

Limoncello

Serve this delicious digestif well-chilled as the perfect ending to a meal. If you can't get enough, simply drizzle it over creamy vanilla gelato or fresh fruit, shake with equal parts vodka for a lemon martini, or add a splash in a glass of champagne as an elegant way to ring in a fresh new year.

INGREDIENTS:

- 7 lemons, preferably organic, rinsed and gently scrubbed with a nylon vegetable brush
- One 750-ml bottle of Boyd and Blair Potato Vodka (80 proof)
- ¾ cup simple syrup (recipe follows)

HOW TO PREPARE:

- Using a Microplane or vegetable peeler, carefully remove the zest of the lemon taking care to avoid the white pith – if there is still a hint of yellow on the lemon after zesting, you know you've done a good job! (After zesting, squeeze the lemons and freeze the juice for later use.)
- Place the lemon zest into a clean glass sealable container large enough to hold both the zest and the vodka – a quart-sized, wide-mouth Mason jar works perfectly.
- Pour the vodka over the zest, place lid on container and let sit out of direct sunlight at room temperature for 5 to 7 days until the vodka has turned bright yellow and has a nice lemon flavor. You can shake daily, but this is not required.

- When desired color and flavor is achieved, drain the lemon-infused vodka through a fine mesh strainer to remove the zest. Stir in the simple syrup, adding more or less according to taste.
- Pour the limoncello mixture into empty bottles and seal. Limoncello will keep indefinitely in the refrigerator. If any cloudiness or sediment occurs, strain through a coffee filter and return to bottle.)

Yield: Slightly less than one liter of limoncello depending on how much simple syrup is used.

Simple Syrup

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup water
- 1 cup refined white sugar (organic or raw sugar may be used but will alter the color and flavor slightly)

HOW TO PREPARE:

- In a medium saucepan combine equal parts sugar and water. Bring to a boil; stir gently until sugar has dissolved. Remove from heat and allow to cool. Extra simple syrup may be stored in the refrigerator for a week or two.

Variation: Crema di Limoncello, a creamy version of limoncello, is easily made by using milk rather than water when making the simple syrup. Bring the milk to just a slight simmer rather than a boil. Stir until the sugar has dissolved.