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# LIFESTYLE

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## The wizardry of sour grapes

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

When he was little, my brother went through a “potion” making phase. During this period, it wasn’t unusual to come across any number of questionably sticky or smelly substances spilled across tables, counters and floors throughout the house. On occasions when little Joe raised the bar to create one of his very special “secret potions,” we often found the evidence days later splashed along the steps to the attic, which for a while became his hidden chamber.

As fun and interesting as my brother’s childhood creativity may have been, real world wizardry can sometimes lead to revolutionary discoveries. One of the world’s oldest and most important potions is still consumed on a daily basis by most everyone, everywhere. It is vinegar.

### THE SOLDIER’S FRIEND

The earliest recorded mention of vinegar comes from around 7,000 years ago in ancient Babylon, when a winemaker discovered that some of his grape juice had soured. More than likely, vinegar had been around for a lot longer than that, since it pretty much makes itself. As a plus, vinegar needs no preservative because it is a preservative. Although now there are hundreds of varieties of vinegar, no one actually invented it. It was simply discovered.

Initially, vinegar was prized for its cleaning power, but along the way its culinary, preservative and healing properties were discovered. Hippocrates found that a concoction of vinegar and honey was effective against a number of maladies, and soon after, the value of vinegar on the battlefield was recognized. From that point until after World War I, vinegar was commonly used as an antiseptic on wounded soldiers. Around 1200 B.C., the Chinese began brewing rice wine vinegar and giving it to the samurai to enhance endurance.

As with the ancient samurai, Greek and Roman soldiers regularly consumed an invigorating vinegar based beverage known as posca. Hard working members of the lower classes found posca to be helpful as well. The upper classes, considering vinegar to be merely spoiled wine, refused to partake. No one understood exactly how vinegar worked, they simply knew that regular doses increased alertness, prevented scurvy and purified contaminated drinking water.

Hannibal brought large quantities of vinegar with him on his march across the Alps. In addition to using it as a medicine, it was used to polish armor and other metals. Most importantly, his soldiers made use of the corrosive nature of vinegar and poured liberal amounts of it over large boulders to dissolve them and clear their path over the mountains. No wonder he needed all of those elephants.

It should be noted that the acidic quality of vinegar is a two-edged sword. Another alchemist trick was to use vinegar to dissolve lead to create a sweet material that was known as sugar of lead. Used as an additive to sweeten tart beverages as late as the 1800s, vinegary sugar of lead caused the deaths of many. For this reason, vinegar should never be stored in metal or leaded glass containers.

### MYSTICS, PHAROHS AND HANNA

According to legend, the lady Pharaoh Cleopatra placed a bet with boyfriend Mark Antony that she could consume an entire fortune in a single meal. Clever Cleo dropped one of her prized pearls in a glass of vinegar and



Laura Hunt Angel

A freshly prepared batch of fruit vinegar, left, and a bottle of herb infused Vinegar of the Four Thieves, right.

let it sit until the end of her meal. By the time she’d finished dining, the pearl was dissolved and she simply swallowed the vinegar and won the bet.

Alchemists claimed that vinegar possessed mystical properties that affected the body, mind and spirit. They believed that vinegar’s ability to remove impurities in the physical world also could transform the spirit, drawing one closer to complete holiness. One even went so far as to claim that in Heaven we will drink vinegar, not water. I certainly hope not.

Biblical accounts include the use of vinegar several times. Christ was even offered vinegar while on the cross, a move that many scholars believe was offered in an attempt to ease his pain. However, the soldiers could just as easily have been trying to keep him revived, thus prolonging his suffering. Vinegar could also have been intended as a taunt, offering him the alchemists’ perceived “holy water.”

Recently, an American University student, Hanna Lundgren, included vinegar in a research project that attempted to discover if certain foods encouraged various types of dreams. In her imaginative study, a spoonful of apple cider vinegar before bed appeared to heighten the vividness of dreams. Hanna may have stumbled upon one of the reasons that vinegar was so highly esteemed by the ancient alchemists.

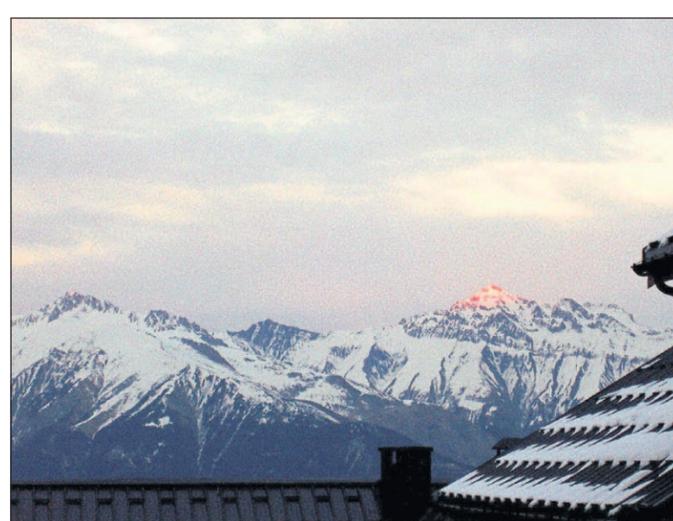
### THIEVES AND HOUSE MAIDS

In the movie, “A Christmas Carol,” there is a scene toward the end where the fourth ghost is showing Scrooge his death. As Scrooge views his lifeless body on its bed, the charwoman (an old English term for maid or “chore woman”) steals his bed curtains and, as a final indignity even takes his clothing. In real life Victorian England, stealing from the dead was a common occurrence, a carry over from



Matt Netteim, Focus Features

Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra.



Public Domain

This beautiful shot of the Hannibal's Alps shows the evening sun hitting a single mountain peak.

the Middle Ages. One true story involving the robbing of the dead resulted in a possibly lifesaving discovery.

During the Plague years it was common for thieves to frequent the dwellings of recently passed individuals to rob the dead. Often, they died before they were caught, but if captured they were usually sentenced to bury the very persons they had stolen from. One group of four miscreants drew particular attention from authorities when, even in such close contact with the dreaded disease, they never became ill. In exchange for their freedom

the men struck a plea deal and agreed to reveal the secret to their apparent immunity. It was a mixture of herbs, garlic and vinegar, which soon became known as the Vinegar of the Four Thieves. Afterward, Plague doctors began both drinking and rubbing their clothing with the special vinegar before heading into Plague ridden areas.

Modern herbalists still use the Vinegar of the Four Thieves. Currently, one of its most popular uses is as an effective, all-natural insect repellent. This lends contemporary credence to the thieves’ claim, considering that

the Plague was caused by fleas

### THE RECIPES

After its discovery, ancient Romans used a variety of fruit, including figs and dates, to purposely create vinegar. One young man in Hawaii is marketing his own banana vinegar. Here are a few age old vinegar concoctions that you can try at home, including the famed Vinegar of the Four Thieves.

### Homemade Fruit Vinegar

This easy recipe makes use of packaged yeast, which is not absolutely necessary to make vinegar. It will, however, ensure a better quality product and faster fermentation. Homemade vinegar is excellent for use in sauces, salad dressing and other recipes, but because it can vary in acidity it should not be used for canning unless you have tested it. Ph testing strips are not considered accurate enough for this, but rather an acidity testing kit should be used. The proper acid level for canning vinegar is 5 percent.

**2 cups overripe fruit**  
**½ cup sugar**  
**2 cups water**  
**1 teaspoon standard yeast**

If you have a large blender or food processor, you can simply place all of the ingredients in it and blend until the fruit is thoroughly broken up. Alternatively, mash the fruit and place it in a large glass container, such as a quart canning jar. Add the remaining ingredients and mix well, making sure that there is enough room in the container to allow for expansion as the process works. Secure a square of cheesecloth with a rubber band over the container, or place a plastic lid loosely on the jar. This will allow the carbon dioxide produced during fermentation to escape. (If it is too tight it may cause the container to burst, leaving you with a smelly mess.) Place the container in a cool place out of direct sunlight and let it sit for two-three weeks or until the bubbling has stopped. Strain the vinegar through cheesecloth and pour into a clean container.

### Ancient Posca

Great Aunt Vessie drank her own version of posca every day for her health, and was just a few months shy of 100 when she passed. She used cider vinegar without any herbs, and made up a small glassful fresh each morning, but otherwise the recipe is the same.

**½ cup apple cider or wine vinegar**  
**½ cup raw honey**  
**1 teaspoon crushed coriander or other herb**  
**2 ½ cups very hot water**

Stir all ingredients together until the honey dissolves. Let cool, then transfer to a bottle or pitcher and refrigerate.

### Vinegar of the Four Thieves

Use this as a disinfectant spray, or dilute it to use as an anti-fungal foot soak or to control dandruff. As an insect repellent, put ¼ cup in a spray bottle, add ¾ cup water and shake. If you wish to try it as a tonic, don’t take it straight — the vinegar will overpower your senses! Instead, add a tablespoonful to hot water or your favorite tea. This is the classic recipe, but old mountain folk often vary the herbs according to what is available to them, sometimes even adding hot peppers or garlic to the mix. Dried herbs are preferable.

**1 tablespoon thyme**  
**2 tablespoons rosemary**  
**2 tablespoons sage**  
**2 tablespoons lavender**  
**2 tablespoons mint**  
**1 teaspoon peppercorns**  
**6 cloves garlic**  
**1 pint raw apple cider vinegar (such as Bragg’s)**  
**A plastic lid, or parchment and a regular lid**

Place all of the herbs in a glass jar. Warm the cider (do not boil), then pour it over the herbs. If using a plastic lid simply place it on the jar. If using a regular canning lid, place a piece of parchment between the lid and the jar so that the metal from the lid does not come in contact with the vinegar. Let sit in a cool dark place for four weeks, then strain the vinegar into a clean jar. Store in a cool dark place.