

Making Italy's Easy, Refreshing Lemon Liqueur

Simply steep vodka with lemon zest and sugar and then taste the citrusy zip of *limoncello* in desserts or on its own

BY JOANNE WEIR

Making homemade liqueurs is a centuries-old tradition in the Mediterranean. It's part of a long-established ritual that includes good friends, conversation, food, and, of course, something refreshing to drink. As America's passion for Mediterranean foods continues to grow, these infused

spirits are becoming increasingly fashionable in the States.

My favorite of these drinks is the Italian *limoncello* (pronounced lee-mohn-CHEL-loh), which I first tasted on a visit to the town of Sorrento on the Amalfi coast. Our hostess brought to the table what looked like miniature martini

glasses, all frosty and beaded with cold and filled with an icy cold, bright yellow liqueur. Sweet but not cloying, and pleasingly tart, *limoncello* captured my imagination. I'm grateful that my hostess was as generous with her recipe as she was with her *limoncello*, for it's really quite simple to make. Vodka, infused with lemon zest and sweetened with sugar syrup, is set to steep for eighty days. The infusion is then strained and bottled.

DRINK LIMONCELLO STRAIGHT OR USE IT IN DESSERTS

Limoncello is remarkably versatile. I sometimes mix it with sparkling wine or mineral water and add a twist of lemon peel to serve as an *apéritif*. Or I use *limoncello* to flavor homemade granitas, sorbets, or ice cream.

Try tossing *limoncello* with blueberries and peaches and serving it over sweet biscuits for a summer shortcake. Or simply drizzle *limoncello* over store-bought sherbet or ice cream and serve it with a plain butter cookie or biscotto for a simple dessert. But my favorite way to enjoy *limoncello* is straight up, ice-cold from the freezer.



Scrub your lemons with warm water and a brush to remove any wax or pesticide residue.



Strip the lemons with a vegetable peeler. You'll get long, wide strips of zest with little of the bitter white pith. Add the zest to half the vodka and wait.



Forty days later, add the second bottle of vodka and the sugar syrup, give the mixture a stir, and let the *limoncello* sit for another forty days.



A FEW INGREDIENTS AND PLENTY OF TIME

The ingredients for *limoncello* are simple and few, and making a batch doesn't require much work, but you'll need some

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time. *Limoncello* must steep for eighty days; start making it now so that it's ready to drink in the hot months to come.

To begin, you'll need a large glass jar—at least four quarts—with a lid. Or divide the recipe into smaller batches.

Choose thick-skinned lemons because they're easier to zest. You'll need

about 15 medium to large fruits. Wash the lemons well with a vegetable brush and hot water to remove any residue of pesticides or wax. Pat the lemons dry and remove the zest. A vegetable peeler does the job best: it gives you long, wide strips of zest with hardly any of the bitter white pith. If you do get some of the pith with the zest, carefully scrape it away with the tip of a knife. Fill the jar with one bottle of the vodka and, as you remove the zest, add it to the jar.

***Limoncello* should taste like fresh lemons**, not poor-quality vodka. Use 100-proof vodka, which has less flavor than a lower proof one. Also, the higher alcohol level will ensure that the *limoncello* won't turn to ice in the freezer.

MIX THE INGREDIENTS AND WAIT

After combining the vodka and lemon zest, cover the jar and store it at room temperature in a dark cabinet or cupboard. There's no need to stir: all you have to do is wait. As the *limoncello* sits, the vodka slowly takes on the flavor and rich yellow hue of the lemon zest.

After about forty days, combine the sugar and water in a saucepan, bring it to a boil, and cook until thickened, about five minutes. Let the syrup cool before adding it to the *limoncello* mixture, along with the other bottle of vodka. Cover and return to the cupboard for another forty days. Then simply strain the *limoncello* into bottles and discard the lemon zest. You can store the bottles in a cupboard, but always keep one in the freezer so it's icy cold when you're ready to drink it.

Limoncello

Start your *limoncello* now, while lemons are plentiful and inexpensive. By the time it's ready, summer will be here and you'll have a freezer full of the perfect hot-weather refresher. *Yields 3 quarts.*

15 thick-skinned lemons
Two 750ml bottles 100-proof vodka
4 cups sugar
5 cups water

For the procedure, see the text above.

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Icy refreshment. Served straight from the freezer in a frosted glass, limoncello is a cool antidote to the heat of a summer afternoon.

Photos: Stephen Chircoli