

Sweetening the Spirit 202 - Compare and Contrast – Strawberries and Sugars

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A cordial can be made many different ways but every part of it will change your flavor. Let's take a look.

History

In order to get a cordial, you must first be able to distil alcohol.

Muslims rediscovered the secrets of distillation from the classical world. The word al-kohl in Arabic refers to kohl the mascara that they and the Egyptians would wear for beauty and protection from the sun. The word is used to describe the mascara of wine [1]. Alcohol was discovered by Jabir Ibn Hayyan and then further refined by Al Rasi [2]. In later medieval times, alchemists referred to the distilled essence of something as the "spirit" of that thing. Hence, why we called distilled alcohols spirits.

There is evidence that the Muslims knew of, and at least one of them drank, something akin to a grain alcohol. The poet Abu Nuwas wrote many poems in praise of alcohol and in one of them, he refers to a wine, "the color of rainwater but is as hot inside the ribs as a burning firebrand" [3]. Rainwater would be clear and a fire burning sounds quite a bit like a high proof alcohol. Non-drinking Muslims did use alcohol for their make-up and perfumes, in their chemical and alchemical experiments, and medicines.

So, we have distilled alcohol in the 9th through 11th centuries at least. Mostly likely, there was a brandy-like substance and a high-proof neutral alcohol. I say "most-likely" because the European names of these substances do not come into being into much later.

The first "cordials" were most likely medical compounds and not necessarily drunk recreationally. Muslim medicine used alcohol (yes in spite of the Koran) and often used sugar. Sugar was known to soothe the stomach and relieves the harshness of many flavors. As the song says, a spoonful helps the medicine go down. There are several Arabic pharmaeopaedia still in existence that describe the medicines that were used.

Making cordials

In Illinois in particular, and possibly many other states, home distillation is not legal. And may not be safe. So, I use commercially available alcohols. For "period" cordials, you are looking at brandy, clear alcohol (many use Vodka instead of everclear), wines, and gin (Verena assures me she has documentation that Gin is period). Other cordials can be made with rum, tequila, whiskey, and almost any other distilled alcohol you care to think of.

The old cooking adage applies here as well; never make a cordial with an alcohol you won't drink. Some advocate using the cheapest alcohol you can stand. The point being that you are changing it anyway. I believe you should use a good but middle-of-the road alcohol. No one is suggesting using high end

alcohols to make a cordial. One, most of those are already flavored. Two, if you want to use 150 year old Napoleon brandy, no one is going to stop you but it might get a bit expensive in the long haul.

I use New Amsterdam Vodka. It is a neutral, non-flavored vodka to substitute for a “pure” alcohol. I use Seagram’s Dry Gin. I use Christian Brothers VS Brandy.

The basic recipe I use for making a cordial is: 750 ml of the base alcohol, some amount of flavorings (depends), and up to 1 cup of a simple syrup. Mix the alcohol and the flavorings for about a week or two. Strain. Add syrup to taste. Wait at least a week.

A comment about the syrup. Some recipes you will find say to add the syrup immediately. You can do this but I recommend against it. One, look at most of your canned goods. They are in a corn syrup solution. Why? Sugar solutions work to preserve the ingredients and inhibit the transfer for flavors from the preserved item. So, the syrup will work against your purpose of taking flavor from the fruit (or whatever) into the alcohol. The other reason is for control. If you wait until after the ingredients have been in the alcohol for a bit, you can more readily control the amount of sugar you use. You can start off with a small amount of syrup and add more later if needed.

Another thing to think about is sanitation and yeast. If you are distilling, then sanitation is probably needed but if you are not distilling, it is not very important. Most of the alcohols you will use to make a cordial will be at least 80 proof. That is 40% alcohol. Yeast and germs will not survive in that environment. So, you do not need to worry about wild yeasts, adding yeasts, or airlocks. You do not have to bleach clean your equipment.

The most important ingredient is time. Generally, the longer you wait, the better the cordial. Most of my cordials are very drinkable with only 2 to 3 weeks. But waiting a few months, often improves the flavors. Not always, but often. Longer than a year or so, most cordials start to lose flavor as the flavoroids lose integrity (age or light).

I have taken strawberries and made the same cordial in vodka, gin, and brandy. I have a pretty good idea about this one but again as a teaching tool, it is to demonstrate how changing the alcohol, now very different from each other, changes the flavor of the cordial.

Why would you use one liquor over another? Vodka is used as a neutral spirit. The intent is that the flavor of the thing itself is what you are after. This is good for any type of flavor but particularly good for subtle flavors. Brandy is a particularly strong flavor. It is good for other strong flavors or when you are looking for an accent. Brandy also imparts a rich and full flavor to a cordial. Gin can be divisive. People either really like it or hate it. For cordials, you want a gin that is not already flavored. Gin is good for citrus and botanicals. That is not to say that you can’t do anything with anything. Some surprising flavor combinations work in spite of these suggestions. So, these are just suggestions.

Next we have the strawberry vodka sweetened with white sugar, brown sugar, clover honey, and wildflower honey.

Some different syrups:

Simple syrup: 1 cup of water to 1 cup of white sugar. I usually end up using 0.5 cup to 0.75 cup. Taste the unsweetened cordial first, then decide. Remember you can always add more. It is difficult to impossible to remove once added.

Can substitute brown sugar. Can substitute honey in place of the whole syrup. Can try any sweetener.

References

[1] Iain Gately, *Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol*, p. 72

[2] Iain Gately, *Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol*, p. 71, p.72

[3] Iain Gately, *Drink, a Cultural History of Alcohol*, p. 72