



Tabasco Sauce Recipe

The Original McIlheny method (1800's):

Avery Island (trivia: the "island" is really a natural salt dome; originally all salt used in production came from natural salt digs in the area), where some of the peppers are grown, is the production site. Grind peppers. Add 1/2 cup kosher salt per gallon of ground peppers and allow salted mash to age in oak barrels. The barrels are topped with a thick layer of salt and allowed to ferment. The salt layer serves as a permeable barrier that allows gases to escape but allows no bacteria, fruit flies, etc. access to the mash. McIlheny allows them to age three years in these oak barrels. After aging, the mash is pulled, checked for quality and, if OK, it is blended with white wine vinegar (they don't say how much) and aged some weeks more (another secret). Finally, the product is pulled, strained and the liquid bottled. If you read the label of ingredients on a Tabasco sauce bottle, the only ingredients are Chili Peppers, Vinegar, and Salt. It is the aging in the oak barrels that sets its flavor apart from any other hot sauce I have ever tried.

Adapting this to your home:

Important Note: as you must pull the liquid from the peppers, they must be fresh, fleshy and of the right state of ripeness. At Avery Island they still use the original "critique baton rouge", a red stick tinted to the exact color of the peppers to be harvested. Peppers not matching the "critique" are rejected. Old or over-dried peppers are the key to failure. One trick for garden peppers is picking them as they are just at the right stage (I've been doing this with super cayenne peppers), then popping them into freezer bags until I have enough to make a batch of sauce.

The ratio of mash to salt seems to be about the same as for sauerkraut. Grind peppers, seeds and all, in a medium to fine grind (compare To Kitchen-Aid cutters). Mix with Kosher salt and put into gallon jug. Add enough sterile water so the whole puree is pourable. Place a fermentation lock (available from homebrew / wine making shops) on the jug. Use a Campden tablet (from same source as above) in the lock. Liquid will form. Allow to ferment until the mash stabilizes (stops fermenting). **It may be 3-5 months before obvious fermentation begins.** It is a very slow ferment. It will last a couple of months. After fermentation is complete pour the mixture into a sterile crock or large glass bowl and add some sterile white wine vinegar to taste. Allow to meld another two weeks. Run the mash through a Chinese, fine strainer, or, last resort, throw it all into a sterile bowl lined with cheesecloth, fold the cheesecloth up into a ball (like making cottage cheese) and twist & squeeze until the juice is extracted. Adjust for taste with salt. Bottle the juice in sterile bottles and keep in fridge. You might want to heat the sauce to pasteurize it. You can also use a little potassium sorbate to preserve it (available from the same homebrew/wine making shop) in the concentration for wine.

If there is a question as to whether the material has fermented, if the liquid that forms on top (with the pepper slurry settled out) is very red, then fermentation has occurred. Otherwise the liquid on top will be very pale and almost colorless. (i.e. not red)

Variables: Age of peppers. Variety. Water content. Consistency of ripeness.

Win or lose, it's a lot of fun. The key is: Keep all your stuff clean and sanitized! Enjoy the effort! Amaze and astound your friends with your own hot pepper sauce. If it doesn't beat Tabasco, sweat it not. It took Mr. McIlheny several years to perfect it.