



herbs & alcohol: tincture making 101

by Alex Williams April 10, 2022

How to make a Homemade Tincture

Tinctures are 'hydroalcoholic' extractions, as most of the alcohol available to purchase contains some amount of water. Most of the alcohol commonly available from the liquor store is somewhere around 50% alcohol and 50% water. Most whiskeys clock in around 45%, most vodkas 40%...this number will always be available on the bottle typically as a proof which is always double the amount of the alcohol percentage (more on this below). This means that for most tinctures, you will be able to extract both alcohol-soluble constituents along with some of the water-soluble constituents.

Alcohol allows the most effective extraction of plant properties while preserving the herbal preparation much longer than water-extraction methods alone. While utilized for many purposes, tinctures are most often offered to support, nourish, and/or balance various aspects of our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being.

The 'Folk Method'

There are two approaches to making a tincture. The folk method and the precise or ratio method.¹ The folk method is a very simple approach that anyone can do as long as they have some herbs,

herb of your choice.

2. Fill the jar all the way with alcohol, ensuring herbs are completely covered by the alcohol.
3. Place parchment paper between the lid and the jar and close tight.
4. Label and steep for a month, shaking every other day or so.
5. After a month, strain the tincture through fine mesh or a cheesecloth.
6. Bottle and enjoy!



While tincture making can be this simple, I tend to take a slightly more complicated approach so I can create consistent tinctures that are unique to the qualities of each herb. This will approach will allow us to replicate our tinctures with consistency in the future.

Both methods share the necessity that the solvent needs to cover all the herbal material so the herbal material does not have the opportunity to oxidize or mold.

The Precise or 'Ratio Method'

Using a more precise method, we need to ask ourselves: how much liquid do I use in proportion 1 to herbs? Another way of asking this is: What is the ratio of herbs to alcohol in a tincture?



ratio depends both on how potent we want our preparation to be and how dense

the herbal material is. It's important to note here that potency does not necessarily mean "more effective". Rather, it has more to do with how much of an extract is needed for a given effect. Less potent preparations require a higher dosage for the same effect as a lower dose of a higher potency preparation. The same applies to the flavor of an herb coming through in a blend, higher potency extracts will require less of that extract to make itself known in the blend.

If you're a little confused, don't worry, there is a wide margin for error in tincture making, and the more you make tinctures the more it makes sense.

For now, let's try and make it as simple as possible by going back to our original question:

What is the ratio of herbs to alcohol in a tincture?

Herbalists use a ratio that is standardized by noting the amount of herb first and the amount of liquid second (1:5) or (1 part herb : 5 parts liquid).

Using this ratio, amounts are always measured by weight rather than volume, as the weights of various solvents are different. Alcohol and water, however, have a weight that is closely related to

So for our purposes, all we need to know is that for a 1:5 extraction rate, we need 1 part by weight of plant material to 5 parts by volume of solvent. We can translate this into, say, 10 grams of dandelion root to 50ml of solvent (typically a mixture of alcohol and water). If you prefer to work in ounces (1 ounce of dandelion root to 5 liquid ounces of solvent), that's fine by me, but I tend towards grams and ml, as it is my preferred method, and I think, much easier when blending smaller amounts of tinctures in the final phase of making your bitters.

The extracts we make will vary between extraction ratios of 1:2 to 1:10 depending on the plant used. Dandelion root is more dense than lavender bud, so we are able to use a lower ratio to successfully cover all of the herbal material, lavender buds are much less dense, so we are not likely to cover all of the herbal material if we use a standard 1:5 ratio, we'll likely need to increase to 1:7 or 1:8 (interestingly this ends up being the perfect ratio to draw out lavender's delicate floral notes while ensuring the pungent, camphor-like bitterness of the buds don't overpower the rest of the extract).

Finally, it is important to note that when using fresh plant material, ratios tend to be lower (1:2 - 1:3) since there is a higher water content present in fresh herbs, which will dilute the overall extract. When using dried material, we use higher ratios, since in drying, most of the constituents are concentrated in the dried material as the water evaporates, thus requiring higher, or less potent ratios to draw out all of the plant constituents.

As always, don't rely solely on numbers to assess quality and potency, we will continually be using our senses throughout the process to gather information on the potency and efficacy of each extract we make.

What alcohol percentage should I use to make a tincture?

Yep, also an important consideration. Different plants require different alcohol percentages (often depending on how much water is present in the plant material) Most extractions require alcohol percentages ranging from 40% ABV - 95% ABV. I recommend buying 190 proof alcohol (95%

city).

To determine the ABV based on 'proof' all you need to do is divide in half (100 proof = 50% ABV).

Unless you are making a fresh plant extract, 95% alcohol needs to be diluted to reach the desired concentration. The way I do this, (while not perfectly precise) does the trick:

Say I need 60% alcohol for a 1:5 tincture. I'll measure my herb out at 100g. For the solvent, I know I need 500ml, but how much of that should be alcohol and how much should be water to end up with 500ml of 60% alcohol?

I take the desired final volume needed, 500ml, multiplied by 60% (or 500×0.6) to get 300ml of 95% alcohol to 200ml of water. Of course, we're using 95% alcohol so the final ABV would actually be closer to 57%, but we're trying to make it easy on ourselves here, so let's just assume that 95% = 100% for the purpose of these calculations.

In the end you will get a ratio that looks something like this: Dandelion, dried root tincture, 1:5 (dry), 60% alcohol

This ratio, or extraction rate as I often call it, indicates that you use 1 part dried dandelion root to 5 parts solvent (using dried plant material) at 60% alcohol by volume (ABV).¹



How to Make Tinctures:

1. Gather your herbal material, maceration jar and lid, unbleached wax paper, alcohol, water, coffee grinder, measuring cup, tape and marker
2. Weigh desired amount herbal material according to extraction ratio given
3. Grind or crush herb and pour herb into clean glass jar
4. Measure out your solvent according to extraction ratio given starting with water
5. Pour measured water over the herbs first (I feel that this is a kind way to wake them up before dousing them with fire water)
6. Pour measured alcohol over the herb (alternatively you can premix the alcohol and add all at once)
7. Cut out a square of unbleached wax paper to completely cover the mouth of the jar
8. Cover tightly with a lid
9. Label with the name of the herb, extraction ratio used, batch number, and date
10. Shake and pray, everyday (as they say)
11. Strain after an appropriate amount of time has passed (typically 2-6 weeks depending on the herb, although some herbs require very short extraction times).



Finishing your Tincture:

1. Open your jar, give it a whiff (be careful, it's still alcoholic), and bask in the sensuousness of the extract you've created.
2. Decant into another jar using a fine mesh strainer and cheesecloth (or just a fine mesh strainer)
3. Squeeze out as much liquid as possible, or use an herb press
4. At this point, you could call it a day, but the tincture will still contain sediment.
5. If you choose to fine strain, let the tincture sit for a few hours until all of the sediment drops to the bottom.
6. Rinse a coffee filter with water in a fine mesh strainer to prepare and remove the papery taste.
7. Slowly decant your settled tincture into another jar through the coffee filter and fine mesh strainer, making sure to not disrupt the sediment on the bottom.

UV rays for long term storage.

11. Store for up to 5 years.

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