

Vinegar Eels, Great Food for Very Small Fry

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Vinegar eels have many properties that make them a great food for very small fry. They are very small, small enough for many fry that are too small to take things like newly hatched brine shrimp. They are active and will attract the attention of hungry fry. They will live for quite some time in the typical aquarium water parameters, so fry have time to hunt them down and have a constant supply until they have eaten them all, so nothing goes to waste or adds to the waste load of the aquarium. They also will hang out near the surface, which is where many fry will also be. But one of the best things about vinegar eels is that they are very easy to culture and maintain.

I have long said you can just leave a culture for years and it will still be active. I have kept a vinegar eel culture going for almost 20 years, and there are periods where I will not have a need for them, or am too lazy to bother. Usually even when I don't have a need, I will take starter cultures to several auctions a year, so they do get some attention, but there have been times I have literally left a culture idle for well over a year, not touching it at all. Of course this is not ideal. The standard maintenance for them is to remove part of the culture and replace it with 50% new cider vinegar and 50% water from a healthy aquarium. Adding a small slice of apple is also recommended. I have been using large gallon sized jars about half to two thirds full. I have also used a one quart, or maybe little larger, plastic peanut jar that seems to work quite nicely. Since it has a plastic top too, you don't need to worry about the metal top corroding like on the glass jar.

I have now had two cultures in the 20 or so years "fail". The first time I had not touched the culture for some time(more than a year for sure), then removed a starter culture for an auction. I had not added a slice of apple for several years either. Several months later, I was looking at the culture and it didn't look right. When I opened it there was a thick scum on the surface and it did not smell to good either. This culture was beyond hope. It had turned almost black and had nothing moving in it.

Recently after telling people how easy vinegar eels are to keep, I thought I should check on mine as I had not used them for more than a year, and had only taken 1 or 2 small cultures in that time. I think I caught this one just in time. I opened it, it did smell kind of funky. There was no vinegar smell at all, just an almost sweet musty smell. There was some scum starting to form on the surface, but there were plenty of eels still moving around in the jar. I removed a small sample and started a new culture. Saved!

So I guess it is possible to kill off a vinegar eel culture, but you have to "work" hard at it.

The real drawback with them is figuring out how to separate the eels from the vinegar, since you really don't want to be adding vinegar to your aquariums. I have tried filtering them using everything from paper coffee filters to expensive laboratory grade micron filters. The paper filters are cheap, the vinegar runs thru them fairly quickly, but you loose a bunch of eels. The smaller micron lab filters keep most eels on the filter, but take forever for the vinegar to flow thru using just gravity since the thousands of eels quickly clog the filter.

One of the simplest ways I have found to separate them came from Mike Hellweg, and is included in his live foods book. Take a long neck clear bottle, like a Arizona Ice tea or Corona beer bottle, fill up to the bottom of the neck with the vinegar eel culture, then put in a wad of cotton and push it down to the level of the liquid. Then slowly and carefully top off the bottle with fresh clean water so that it comes up above the cotton. The cotton will keep the vinegar from mixing with the water and the eels will come to the surface thru the cotton. You can then siphon off the eels in the fresh water. This really works, try it. Test the water for pH, it does not smell like vinegar either. If it does, take out the cotton and some of the culture and try again. Add the water slowly so it does not mix when you are adding it. Then simply feed to your fry. You can also add new fresh

water and repeat this using the same bottle and culture for a couple of days until most of the eels have been removed.

I would highly recommend anyone who might be interested in breeding fish with very small fry consider having a vinegar eel culture just sitting on the shelf somewhere. They mostly do really last forever, just remember, forever is a really long time and you should give them a little attention every so often.