

A Chef's Guide to Oils

EACH COOKING OIL
HAS ITS OWN UNIQUE
CHARACTERISTICS.

BY
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NOTHING IS TOO GOOD WHEN IT COMES TO feeding your family. You'll run all over town for the ripest tomatoes, the most flavorful whole-grain pasta, the freshest baby greens. But using poor-quality cooking oil to prepare these top-shelf ingredients is like buying a Maserati and putting low-grade gas in it—you won't get all the performance you paid for.

Fortunately, recent years have seen a spate of cooking oils appear on market shelves. "It's no longer just a choice between olive oil and extra virgin olive oil," says Food Network blogger Cameron Curtis.

Besides taste and composition (monounsaturated versus polyunsaturated fats, for example), an important variable between cooking oils is *smoke point*, the temperature at which oil starts to smoke. This is the point at which oil oxidizes, creating harmful free radicals and toxic fumes. In general, oils that are more refined, or processed, tend to have higher smoke points; the higher the smoke point, the hotter the cooking temperature it can stand.



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It also helps to know that you should add food to the pan “when the oil is shimmering,” says Pat Weaver, food service director of the Bozeman, Montana Community Food Co-op. “When the oil is heating up, there’s a point right before it smokes where it gets active in the pan and kind of shimmers. That’s when you want to add the food.”

With those points in mind, here is a selection of popular cooking oils.



CANOLA OIL

Canola is an all-purpose oil with a high smoke point. “It’s excellent for baking, cooking, sautéing or frying,” says Heidi McIndoo, MS RD LDN, author of *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to 200-300-400 Calorie Meals* (ALPHA). “Also there’s little to no flavor so it doesn’t take over a dish.”

Canola oil, named after Canada where it was originally developed, comes from the rapeseed, refined to remove bitterness. It’s rich in monounsaturated fat, the healthy kind that can reduce cholesterol levels, and low in saturated fat. It also has a good balance of omega-6 and -3—essential fatty acids crucial for everything from brain function to blood clotting, and that have also been shown to reduce cardiac risk.

Sounds like the perfect oil, right? Weaver has found this to be debatable. “We use canola oil in many of our prepared foods because it’s more available and affordable, but I’ve had to answer a lot of customer concerns,” he explains. More than 90% of canola oil is highly processed and made from genetically modified (GMO) rapeseed. Weaver gets around this by buying certified organic canola oil. “Now we know we aren’t using GMOs and we are offering a healthy oil, and that feels right,” he says.



OLIVE OIL

The king of heart-healthy Mediterranean cooking, olive oil supplies monounsaturated fats and is low in saturated fat, and has anti-inflammatory properties. Studies have shown that diets rich in olive oil can contribute to a decline in cardiovascular disorders, including hypertension and stroke, thanks to its cholesterol-lowering capacity. It also has a good balance of omega-6 and -3 and is rich in vitamins E and K.

Many home chefs tend to use olive oil as an all-around choice in the kitchen, but it has a low smoke point. “You really should never use olive oil for cooking,” suggests Elizabeth Nyland, author of *Cooking with Coconut Oil* (Countryman Press). “It’s very delicate and destroyed so easily under heat, so I always recommend using it to finish off a dish or in dressings.” Nyland describes the flavor as “grassy” initially, with a slightly peppery finish, but it varies widely. “The flavor depends on where they are

from, what region, and how it’s pressed,” she notes. Extra virgin is the most flavorful, and the most delicate.

COCONUT OIL

Health practitioners have warned us against saturated fats for years now. So why then is coconut oil, which contains about 92% saturated fat, so high on the health food chain? “Coconut oil is a plant-based fat with no unhealthy cholesterol, meaning it occurs naturally as opposed to those man-made hydrogenized saturated fats found in most processed foods,” Nyland explains. “It’s a nutrient-rich, healthy fat with so many other benefits.”

Made from pressing the dried flesh of the coconut, coconut oil is one of the richest sources of lauric acid, a fatty acid believed to have antimicrobial properties and to boost the immune system. Nyland

explains that it is also rich in polyphenols, antioxidant substances that have been shown to prevent such degenerative ailments as cardiovascular disease and cancer.



In addition to its health benefits, coconut oil has a medium-high smoke point. “You can pretty much cook anything with it,” Nyland says. “It has a slight coconut flavor, but that neutralizes in cooking.” She rubs it all over chicken before roasting, uses it for baking and stir-fries, and slathers it on in place of butter.



AVOCADO OIL

Avocado oil is made from the pressed flesh of the nutrient-rich avocado. It is known for its high levels of healthy monounsaturated fats, which can lower LDLs and raise good cholesterol levels. Avocado oil is also high in phytosterol, a compound found in plants that studies have shown to decrease some cancer risks and lower LDL levels, among other health benefits.

Avocado oil has a high smoke point and therefore can be used in most forms of cooking. "It can be one of the best cooking oils, even for deep frying," Nyland says. "But we're not going to see it in most restaurants yet because it's more expensive and not as readily available." As far as taste goes? "It's pretty neutral, with a very faint avocado smell," she explains. "But the flavor is so light that it can be used in anything from muffins to stir-fries."

MACADAMIA NUT OIL

The exotic, tropical flavors of the macadamia—with its sweet, buttery flesh—make it more like a treat than a go-to snack nut. Macadamia nut oil follows suit.

On the more expensive end of



the oil spectrum, macadamia nut oil can be used in similar fashion to olive oil, and is a great gourmet addition to salad dressings. However, it has a higher smoke point than olive oil. That makes it good for high-heat baking and sautéing, where it adds a rich, bold, buttery flavor to a dish.

Macadamia nut oil has the highest levels of monounsaturated fat among cooking oils, along with high levels of beneficial omega-3s. It has also been shown to reduce inflammation and protect against heart disease and stroke.

Nyland explains that macadamia nut oil is one of the few oils allowed on the popular Paleo diet, which doesn't include highly processed carb-based foods. "I use it where most people would use canola oil in baking, because it's a great flavorful substitute," Nyland says. "It holds onto the flavor of the macadamia nut with a subtle sweet taste."



GRAPE SEED OIL

Grape seeds contain oil? It's true: With the right technology, oil can be pressed from seeds left over after the winemaking process.

Unlike many other oils, grape seed oil has low levels of monounsaturated fat (17% compared to 84% in macadamia nut oil) and very high levels of polyunsaturated fat. Known as the other healthy fat, polyunsaturated fat is believed to similarly decrease bad cholesterol levels, benefitting cardiovascular health.

Grape seed oil also contains high levels of omega-6, which can be problematic. "The Paleo diet doesn't include any omega-6 seed oil because

it causes inflammation in the body," Nyland says.

Research backs her up. Although essential for many bodily functions, omega-6 that isn't balanced out by omega-3—a common occurrence in the standard modern diet, which does not contain adequate omega-3—can promote inflammation and has been shown to contribute to chronic pain syndromes. But in small doses (as is recommended with all oils), McIndoo says grape seed oil can be a great option for higher-heat sautéing and baking in place of olive oil due to its higher smoke point.



PEANUT OIL

Deep-fried food is on the no-no list when it comes to healthy eating, but many people consider it a rare treat. So, peanut oil would be the go-to option.

Made from steam-cooked pressed peanuts (technically a legume, not a nut), many fast-food chains have switched over to peanut oil to make French fries, and most Chinese restaurants use it exclusively. "Peanut oil is high in unsaturated fat like olive oil," McIndoo says. "It has very high smoke point, which is why it's usually used for frying."

Peanut oil has a balance of mono and polyunsaturated fats, which

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means it also has a good balance of omega-3s and -6s. Peanut oil has a mild flavor that doesn't tend to take on or absorb the other flavors of the food that is cooked in it.

Because peanut oil is refined and processed under high heat, which removes the peanut protein, those with peanut allergies can usually tolerate food fried in peanut oil, according to the American College of Allergy, Asthma, & Immunology. (People who are highly allergic to peanuts should check with their practitioners before indulging.)

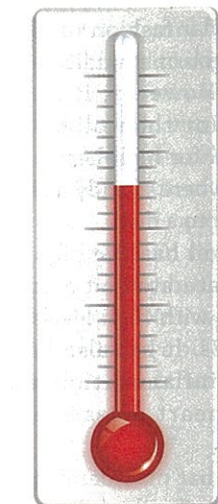


SESAME OIL

Used frequently in Asian cuisines, sesame oil—especially the toasted version—adds an undeniable flair to a dish.

“Sesame oil is a great example of one that has a low smoke point but can add immense flavor,” Weaver says. “For something like a stir-fry, you can add it after you’ve fried up the vegetables so it doesn’t heat up much.”

Made from pressed sesame seeds, this oil comes in two varieties. Light sesame oil, made from untoasted seeds, has a milder nutty flavor and can be used more liberally. Dark



OIL SMOKE POINTS

HIGH (425-510°F)

Stir-frying, searing and high-heat cooking
avocado, canola, peanut

MEDIUM HIGH (360-425°F)

Stir-frying or sautéing at medium-high heat, baking
coconut, grape seed, macadamia nut

MEDIUM (280-360°F)

Light sautéing, sauces, salad dressings
olive, sesame (unrefined)

sesame oil, made from toasted seeds, has a bolder flavor, and should be used more sparingly to finish off a dish.

Aside from its use in stir-fries, sesame oil is a great addition to Asian-

inspired salads and noodle dishes. Sesame seed oil has a good balance of poly- and monounsaturated fats and is low in saturated fat. It also boasts high levels of vitamin E and other antioxidants. ❖

Homemade Mayonnaise

Elizabeth Nyland says, “Any oil you choose to use in this recipe is the star ingredient; you will taste it in the finished product.” She says you can use either macadamia nut, olive or avocado oil, but adds, “A combo of these three oils together would be a perfect flavor match.”



- 2 egg yolks
(room temperature)
- 1/2 tsp mustard powder
- 1/2 tsp salt
- 400 ml oil (1.7 cups,
or about 1 3/4)
- 1 lemon, juiced
- 1 tsp white vinegar
- dash Worcestershire sauce
- pinch cayenne
- 1-2 tsp water (optional)
- 1 tsp sugar (optional)
- salt and pepper to taste

1. In the bowl of a stand mixer with the whisk attached (or use a hand blender or a metal bowl or even a regular blender), mix together the first three ingredients at medium speed.
2. Very, very, very slowly, add half of the oil in a fine drizzle. If you are unsure how slow to start, just start with drips.
3. Add the lemon juice and vinegar and continue to whisk.
4. Add the remaining oil.
5. Add the Worcestershire, cayenne and season to taste. Refrigerate and use within one week.

Yield: 2 cups. Reprinted with permission of Elizabeth Nyland from GuiltyKitchen.co