

SANTÉ

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dry **creek** dazzles

a snail's tale

essential **oils:** nut and
seed extracts

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froze drinks
COOL PROFITS



ANOINTED WITH FLAVOR: using nut and seed oils

by andrew hunter

THE MOST important ingredient in a restaurant's success isn't location; it's flavor.

Curious diners are seeking bright, bold, innovative flavors, and they're willing to drive off the beaten path to get them. One effortless way chefs can satisfy their flavor-seeking guests is to add a distinctive drizzle of virgin nut or seed oil to menu choices. Velvety textured and richly aromatic, these extracts give chefs an instant advantage in the chase for celebrated taste.

FRAGRANT FINISHES

Eric Brennan, executive chef of Harvest in Boston, features nut oil in a salad of maple-vinegar-roasted beets with Vermont sage-chèvre tempura and mixed cress. "We drizzle the salad with pine nut oil just before serving, which finishes the vinaigrette and ties together the maple and chèvre flavors." He adds, "We don't always promote the oils on the menu, because they add an element of mystery to the dining experience. They're the flavor that people can't put their finger on. At the same time, we educate our servers so they're able to advise our guests who have nut allergies."

At Grill 23 & Bar in Boston, Executive Chef Jay Murray is a self-professed flavor nut. "But I'm a

minimalist," he admits, "which means a dish is most intriguing when assertive flavors are delicately balanced." Chef Murray serves scallops sautéed in curry oil with lobster-stuffed French toast; a drop of argan oil is placed next to the scallops just before the plate is sent out to the table. Lesser known but gaining culinary kudos, argan oil comes from the seed buried inside the fruit of the argan tree, which is native to Morocco. The fruit resembles a large, round green olive. Murray discovered the oil several years ago and has been using it ever since. "Argan reminds me of the Middle East, with its nutty, spicy flavor and big aroma," explains the chef.

Everything from grilled fish to grilled cheese gets a judicious drizzle of nut oil in the kitchens of Cheese Please Catering in San Mateo, California. Executive Chef John Kallmeyer extols the character of nut oils: "They have a pure and clean flavor that I love. But a dish doesn't have to be fancy to benefit from nutty oils. I have a client who thinks my grilled cheese sandwiches are the best in the world. Of course, I use great cheese and bread, but my secret ingredient is a drizzle of hazelnut oil. Just a drop perfumes the whole sandwich."

A PRESSING MATTER

Like fine wines and olive oils, virgin nut oils are best when pressed in small batches. Jean-Marc Montegottero is an artisan nut oil producer from Beaujeu, France, who defines his oils as “extracted from healthy, high-quality fruits [nuts and seeds]. Nothing is added; nothing is corrected. This way, the quality of the original fruit shows its own expression, season after season.”

Montegottero, who supplies Michelin-three-star French chefs and their American colleagues with handcrafted oils, explains the traditional extraction process. “There are five steps. The first is *selecting* the highest quality fruits to be pressed. The second step involves *shelling* the fruit to remove all impurities, and then *crushing* or *flattening* the shelled fruit under an old-style millstone. Step three is *toasting* or *roasting*. This is the most critical step in the process, because it dictates the strength and flavor of the oil. I use cast-iron pans because they allow the flavor of the fruit to concentrate and stay in the oil. Step four is the slow *extraction* of oil from the fruit in a century-old hydraulic press through several layers of filters. Finally, the oil is *filtered* through blotting paper to remove most, but not all, of the sediment.”

COST CONTROL

Virgin nut and seed oils average about \$3.75 an ounce. “When I saw my first invoice, I wondered if I should be cooking with this pine nut oil or giving it to my wife to use as perfume,” laughs Murray. “But the oils are actually a good value because we use so little per serving—a half teaspoon—so the cost per serving is about thirty cents.”

Kallmeyer pours the oils into “very small squeeze bottles to control accuracy, portion, and waste.” He says, “I can afford almost any ingredient if I get 100 percent usage. It’s the waste that squashes my food costs.”

Brennan goes through most nut oils quickly: “Small bottles [250 ml] last only a few days in the restaurant, so we don’t refrigerate them, although we do keep them away from the heat.” Kallmeyer adds, “Sometimes we buy large bottles [750 ml] for big events. If we have oil left over, we keep it tightly sealed in the walk-in for at least a month. I always let it come to room temperature, though, before using it again.”

GO FOR THE GOLD

Chefs agree that nut and seed oils can’t make a mediocre dish great, but they can make an excellent dish outstanding. Watch your guests come back time and again when you start a dish with beautiful ingredients and finish it with a drop of nutty gold.

“Nothing is added; nothing is corrected. This way, the quality of the original fruit [nuts and seeds] shows its own expression, season after season.”

—jean-marc montegottero





THE POSSIBILITIES

Here are general descriptions of the most popular nut and seed oils. For more detailed information on particular brands see this issue's Wine, Spirits & Food Review section.

- **Almond.** Delicate. Use in marinades for fish, especially halibut and sea bass.
- **Argan.** Nutty, spicy, and bold flavor. The oil is dark with a reddish tint. Use with other spicy foods or to enhance delicate flavors.
- **Hazelnut.** Delicate. Use in vinaigrettes for salads and sweetbreads.
- **Pecan.** Fragrant. Pairs perfectly with rice salads, white and wild rice, fishes, seafood, and so forth.
- **Pine nut.** Versatile, smooth flavor. Pair with shellfish, fish, vegetables, and wine sauces.
- **Pistachio.** Robust with a long finish. Mix with balsamic vinegar and honey to dress endive, green beans, and lobster.
- **Poppy seed.** Strong, floral flavor. Pair with green salads or any kind of poppy seed bread.
- **Walnut.** Robust. Pair with bitter vegetables such as endive, chicory, and dandelion, and use in vinaigrettes for simple green or composed salads.

ARGAN ASIDE

The food world is full of curiosities, not the least of which is argan oil's origin. According to food historians, goats get credit for this oil's emergence from fruit to food supply. Goats would eat the fruit from the low-hanging branches of the argan tree and digest it, excreting the seed. Resourceful folks collected these seeds and cracked the hard shell to harvest the three kernels inside. Once removed, the kernels would be roasted and ground with a quarry stone. The resulting powder was then mixed with water to create dough, and finally the dough was pressed for oil. Until recently, argan oil production was done entirely by hand. Though mechanized today, this dark, spicy oil is still cold-pressed.

THE OIL PIPELINE

Honest Foods

San Bruno (San Francisco), CA
800-584-4481
honestfoods.com

K. L. Keller Imports

Oakland, CA
510-839-7890
kikellerimports.com

Millissime, Ltd.

New York, NY
718-777-7808
millissime.com

Sid Wainer & Sons

New Bedford, MA
508-999-6408
sidwainer.com

Spectrum Naturals

Petaluma, CA
800-995-2705
spectrumorganic.com

Splendid Palate

Sharon, CT
877-SPFOODS
splendidpalate.com