

Cooking Oils and Fats

Yvonne Maffei gives us the skinny on which fats to use and when.



There are so many types of oils to cook with that it often can be overwhelming to know, to determine not only which ones taste right but which go with the dishes we want to make and which tolerate the most heat when cooking. There's also the issue of which ones are actually good for us. Plenty of information abounds about the fats that are good and bad for your health, and much of it now involves the medical and nutritional community coming full circle about the use of traditional foods as "healthy" fats.

While we won't go into depth here about the ongoing debate on which oils are considered good or bad, it's useful to understand a few important terms about oils and fats for cooking: saturated, unsaturated and trans fats. Keep in mind that all fats and oils are some combination of fatty acids.

Saturated fats are derived from both animals and plants and are typically solid at room temperature, i.e. butter, beef tallow, etc. Unsaturated fats are derived from vegetables and plants and include monounsaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats, the latter of which remain liquid even when refrigerated. Both types of oils are important in a healthy diet and best consumed in moderation, however polyunsaturated oils should not be heated or used in cooking. Trans fats, also known as hydrogenated fats, are a by-product of manufacturing in which oils such as corn, soybean, or canola (which are typically already rancid from the extraction process) are mixed with tiny metal particles and then processed further. Trans fats are often found in processed foods and baked goods and are considered unhealthy and best to be avoided.

One note of caution for all consumers is to beware of fake oils in the market. One must read labels carefully to understand the purity of the product you are purchasing. This is particularly so for olive oil as the cheaper blends can in fact be a blend of olive oil and canola or another oil that is considered far inferior to the freshly pressed virgin olive oil you think you're buying.

Whenever possible, always purchase unrefined or "virgin" oils for use in cooking or consuming without the involvement of heat. This means the oil has not been extracted or exposed to very high heat, which damages its particles and often turns most oils rancid.

Below is a list of oils I recommend in cooking and consuming without any heat - such as a dressing or to drizzle on top of deliciously prepared foods.

Plant Oils

Avocado - high tolerance for heat; great for use in sautés and stir-fry, as well as salads.

Coconut - medium tolerance for heat; adds creamy coconut flavor to baking dishes and is a good option for light sautés with an Asian or Caribbean flavour.

Flaxseed - excellent source of healthy oil; always keep refrigerated; never heat it up; best for use in salads and spreads.

Grapeseed - medium to high tolerance for heat; neutral flavor

makes it good for baking as well as pan-fried foods.

Macadamia Nut - medium to high tolerance for heat; great for salad dressings and Asian-style dishes.

Olive - medium tolerance for heat; ideal for salads and very light sautés; should be cloudy (an indication that it has not been filtered) and golden yellow in colour (an indication that it comes from ripened olives).

Peanut - high tolerance for heat; use sparingly in stir fry dishes.

Rice Bran Oil - high tolerance for heat; use in sautés and stir fry.

Sesame - medium tolerance for heat; great for stir fry and Asian-style dishes.

Safflower, Sunflower - consume only when a truly cold-pressed version of these oils can be used. Should not be heated for use in cooking, frying, or baking but instead as a dressing or dip.

Walnut - medium tolerance for heat; great as a salad dressing or drizzled uncooked on top of finished dishes such as soups, salads and grilled vegetables.

Animal Fats

Butter - medium to high tolerance for heat, choose organic varieties; clarified butter (ghee) is also an excellent option; use in lightly fried foods and roasting chicken.

Chicken Fat - high tolerance for heat; use the fat of free-range and antibiotic-free chickens. The fat will melt and can be used to fry or sauté most foods.

Duck and Goose Fat - high tolerance for heat; delicious for frying or roasting potatoes and other tuberous plants.

Beef and Mutton Tallow - rendered fat (melted down) and known as suet, this comes from the cavity of the animal; stable fat which tolerates high heat for frying.

In summary, the fats and oils you choose when cooking are extremely important and often overwhelming when considering all of the options and differing price points available at the shops. One way to overcome that is to always choose unrefined, unheated, non-manufactured, all natural oils and fats from a pure source. When choosing animal fats, a dhabihah halal animal that was humanely raised and from a vendor or farmer you know and trust is your best option. As with all things, continue to read and educate yourself on the topic. Include learning about traditional foods and the natural way of processing and using them. It's almost always the healthiest way to cook, eat, and live.

Resources:

The Harvard Medical School Family Health Guide - <http://www.health.harvard.edu/fhg/updates/Truth-about-fats.shtml>

Fallon, S. and Enig, M. (2001) Nourishing Traditions: The Cookbook that Challenges Politically Correct Nutrition and the Diet Dictocrats