

KNOW YOUR OILS

We have many good oils to choose from today and each cooking oil has its own unique characteristic. Besides taste and composition (monounsaturated versus polyunsaturated fats, for example) you should understand the importance of each cooking oil's smoke point. Smoke point is the temperature at which oil starts to smoke and this is when the oil oxidizes, creating harmful free radicals and toxic fumes.

Pat Weaver, food service director of the Bozeman, Montana Community Food Co-op, says "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."

Let's look at a selection of popular cooking oils.

CANOLA OIL - all purpose oil with a high smoke point. Good for baking, cooking sautéing or frying with little to no flavor so it doesn't take over a dish.

Canola oil comes from the rapeseed, refined to remove bitterness and is rich in monounsaturated fat. Also has a good balance of omega-6 and omega-3, essential fatty acids crucial for everything from brain function to blood clotting. Sounds good but the downside more than 90% of canola oil is highly processed and made from genetically modified (GMO) rapeseed.

OLIVE OIL - this is the king of heart-healthy Mediterranean cooking since it 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 because of its cholesterol-lowering capacity. Olive oil has a good balance of omega-6 and omega-3 and is rich in vitamins E and K.

Olive oil has a low smoke point so it is best not to cook with it. It's very delicate and destroyed so easily under heat, so just use it to finish off a dish or in dressings. Olive oil's flavor will depend on the region of growth and how it is pressed. Extra virgin is the most flavorful and most delicate.

COCONUT OIL - We have been warned for years not to use this saturated fat - 92% saturated fat. But now it is so high on the health food chain - why? Coconut oil is a plant-based fat with no unhealthy cholesterol, meaning it occurs naturally as opposed to those man-made hydrogenated saturated fats found in most processed foods. It turns out to be a nutrient-rich, healthy fat with so many 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 it boost the immune system. It is also rich in an antioxidant substance (polyphenols) that have been shown to prevent ailments as cardiovascular disease and cancer.

Coconut Oil has a medium-high smoke point so you can pretty much cook anything with it. It has a slight coconut flavor, but that neutralizes in cooking. Great0 on toast instead of butter, it is delicious.

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 lowers LDL levels, among other health benefits.

This oil has a high smoke point and therefore can be used in most forms of cooking. As far as taste goes, it's pretty neutral, with a very faint avocado smell. But the flavor is so light that it can be used in anything from muffins to stir-fries.

MACADAMIA NUT OIL - Can be used in similar fashion to olive oil, it does have a higher smoke point. It is one of the few oils allowed on the popular Paleo diet, which doesn't use highly processed carb-based foods. Can also be used where you would use canola oil in baking, it does hold onto the flavor of the macadamia nut with a subtle sweet taste.

GRAPE SEED OIL - with the right technology, oil can be pressed from seeds left over after the winemaking process. Grape seed oil has low levels of monounsaturated fat (17% compared to 84% in macadamia nut oil) and very high levels of polyunsaturated fat. Polyunsaturated fat is believed to decrease bad cholesterol levels. This oil also contains high levels of omega-6. The Paleo diet doesn't include an omega-6 seed oil because it causes inflammation in the body.

A diet that is high in omega-6 fats that is not balanced with omega-3 which is very common with the standard modern diet can promote inflammation and has been shown to contribute to chronic pain syndromes. But small amount of grape seed oil in sautéing can be a great option since it has a higher smoke point than olive oil.

PEANUT OIL - deep frying food is not healthy but for a rare treat peanut oil is a good option for this. This oil is steam-cooked pressed peanuts (not a nut but a legume). Peanut oil is high in unsaturated fats like olive oil. It has a very high smoke point which is why it is used today for frying.

Peanut oil has a balance of mono and polyunsaturated fats, which means it also has a good balance of omega-3s and omega-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.

SESAME OIL - This oil is frequently used in Asian cuisine's, especially the toasted version because of the added flavor. This oil has a low smoke point but immense flavor. Add it after you have stir fried the vegetables.

Made from pressed sesame seeds, this oil comes in two varieties. Light untoasted seeds with a milder nutty flavor and dark sesame oil, made from toasted seeds with a bolder flavor. This oil is a good balance of poly and monounsaturated fats and is low in saturated fat. It boasts high levels of vitamin E and other antioxidants.