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Cooking

Secrets of the Chefs

From salts mixed with citrus or truffles to oil pressed from pumpkin seeds, the spices and condiments that give professional cooks' food that extra flavor boost are now available for home kitchens

By **KATY MCLAUGHLIN**

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At Bay Wolf, a restaurant in Oakland, Calif., the \$22 grilled sea bass comes topped with a complex sauce of pureed roasted peppers, cilantro and blanched almonds. But the ingredient that gives it a distinctive flavor? A high-class version of Mrs. Dash. Chef Michael Wild sprinkles a brick-red powder into the sauce to "round out the flavors and bring everything together," he says.



Chip Simmons

As complicated as today's haute cuisine has become, many of America's top chefs rely more than you might think on a smidgen or squirt of something simple from the pantry. At Wallsé in Manhattan, the deep roasted, nutty flavor of the salads comes from a spoonful of Styrian pumpkin-seed oil that chef Kurt Gutenbrunner calls a "staple." Roy Yamaguchi, chef and founder of 32 Roy's restaurants, says that when he hosts a private dinner, he drizzles argan oil on sashimi and carpaccio. In San Francisco, Nancy Oakes of Boulevard uses vin cotto, a syrupy vinegar that she says rivals the taste of 50-year-old balsamic, at a fraction of the cost.

Thanks to the booming specialty-food industry, which is putting exotic condiments and sauces in upscale grocery stores, home chefs can now get many of the same unusual spices the pros use -- and we're not talking about MSG. Carol Wallack, co-owner of Deleece in Chicago, says she's spotted favorite ingredients including wasabi oil, balsamic syrup and pumpkin-seed oil on retail shelves. "I can go to Trader Joe's and create professional-level meals in my own kitchen," she says.

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To find out which products are worth adding to the home cook's repertoire in time for holiday cooking and gift giving, we polled more than 60 chefs for their picks of the most delicious products. We narrowed the options to six ingredients that were the most popular or seemed to us to be the most useful for home cooks. Then we put them to the test, cooking and tasting them in simple dishes.

We found that some of the best ingredients are also low-calorie, including several substitutes for vinegar that deliver taste and complexity without a sharp bite. We also learned how to make a helpful condiment with citrus rinds we usually throw out -- and discovered that one chef's suggestion for combining oil and ice cream turned out to be scrumptious.



You don't need to be whipping up culinary masterpieces to make use of these, either. For example, truffle salt is a new and relatively inexpensive way to transform basic home dishes like scrambled eggs and mashed potatoes (it also tastes pretty good on popcorn). A simple roast chicken, likewise, can take on a much different flavor with such seasonings as zatar.

Some ideas were too much work for the payoff, such as one chef's suggestion that we chop and cook prosciutto, let it cool, grind it in the blender and use it as a porky powder on meats. The flavor was fine, but too subtle for all the rigamarole. And, to our taste, the \$37 argan oil seemed musty and a little odd.

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For chefs, of course, novelty is king. Exotic ingredients enable restaurants to market a couple dollars worth of chicken as "truffled poulet" with a double-digit price or turn a few pennies of greens into a \$9 salad. That's why chefs will spend time and money on ingredients with a subtle impact that allow them to add an enticing line to the menu or make the plate look prettier.

Filtering through the options was a challenge. Sales of specialty condiments -- items like mustard, marinades and barbecue sauces -- increased by nearly 26% from 2002 to 2004, according to the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade, making condiments the fastest-growing specialty-food category after beverages. There were 825 specialty sauces and seasonings introduced last year, also second only to beverages. The holiday season is when an estimated 30% of all specialty food is sold, so the heat is on for retailers to get the fancy oils and marmalades out the door before dieting season kicks off in the new year.

In our search, we focused on ingredients that would work for many dishes. We also rejected items that were too expensive or esoteric, and held the priciest flavorings to a high standard. Here's what we found.

PIMENTÓN DE LA VERA

The most frequently cited "secret spice" in our poll was pimentón de la Vera, the red powder Bay Wolf's Mr. Wild uses on his sea bass. A paprika made in Spain's central western La Vera valley, pimentón is produced by smoking mild chili peppers over oak logs, then grinding them into a powder. The result differs from Hungarian paprika because of its smoky taste; it comes in three varieties, sweet or mild (*dulce*), bittersweet (*agridulce*) and slightly spicy (*picante*). Pimentón is a key ingredient in Spanish staples like paella and chorizo sausage, but chefs are inventing many new uses for it beyond Spanish food.

Jay Murray, executive chef of Grill 23 & Bar in Boston, says that when he's cooking for his vegetarian wife, "I use it anywhere I would use bacon." Mr. Murray makes pimentón salt and rubs it on steak before grilling or broiling, a treatment we found delectable, with a subtle but not overpowering smoky taste reminiscent of beef grilled over aromatic wood.

Where to get it: Specialty-food stores; Tienda.com (\$4.95 for 2.5 ounces); and Igourmet.com (\$3.99 for 2.7 ounces). Sometimes called smoked paprika.

How to use it:

Shrimp: Combine 2 pounds of shrimp in ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, ¼ teaspoon pimentón (sweet, bittersweet or hot) and ¼ teaspoon salt. Mix well, then grill or sear shrimp in a hot cast-iron pan, about one or two minutes on each side.

Creamed corn: Stir ½ teaspoon pimentón salt into 10 ounces creamed corn.

PUMPKIN-SEED OIL

Another versatile find is pumpkin-seed oil, an ingredient that brought out national pride in Mr. Gutenbrunner, Austrian-born chef of Wallsé, Thor and Café Sabarsky in New York. "Italians have olive oil on their table; in Austria we have pumpkin-seed oil on our tables," said Mr. Gutenbrunner, who serves it as a garnish on salads and pumpkin soup.

Pumpkin-seed oil is made from green pumpkin seeds that are dried, lightly roasted and pressed. Much of the artisanal oil on the market comes from Styria in southeastern Austrian province where the pumpkins grow and the oil is a cultural tradition. It has an unusual color -- green with red highlights --

and a deep roasted, nutty flavor.



A "bull's eye" of pumpkin- seed oil in olive oil.

We liked it best on cold foods, like salads; on hot green beans, it lost its nuance and just tasted oily. The chef also suggested pouring a bit over vanilla ice cream. "You need an open mind," he admonished us when we protested -- and he was right. When we tasted it, we found the result was sophisticated enough to pass as a dinner-party dessert.

Where to get it: Igourmet.com (\$14.99 for 8.5 ounces); spectrumorganics.com (\$13.79 for 8.5 ounces); or check Amazon.com's gourmet section. Sometimes labeled Styrian or Toasted.

How to use it:

Salad: Lightly dress a salad for two people with regular dressing, then add 1 tablespoon pumpkin-seed oil and toss.

Dipping oil "bull's eye": Pour extra-virgin olive oil into a shallow bowl, then carefully pour pumpkin-seed oil into the center. Pumpkin-seed oil will form a dark circle within the olive oil.

Ice cream: Pour 1 teaspoon over two scoops of vanilla ice cream.

VERJUS

Chefs are also using verjus (or verjuice), a sweet and tart unfermented juice made from unripened wine grapes, for everything from salad dressing to soups. Kevin McCarthy, executive chef at the Point in Saranac Lake, N.Y., says it balances the sweetness of fruit with a mildly acidic note. Verjus is mellower than vinegar and, unlike it, pairs well with wine. And since it's not fermented, it's lighter than wine -- and non-alcoholic.

Where to get it: Many specialty food stores; minus8vinegar.com; or check the gourmet section of Amazon.com.

How to use:

Peaches: Slice one ripe white peach, sprinkle with 3 tablespoons verjus and top with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Pears: Slice one ripe pear, sprinkle with 3 tablespoons verjus and drizzle with 1 tablespoon honey.

Vinaigrette: Mix one to two parts verjus with three parts olive oil. A squirt of lemon is optional.

ALTERNATIVE VINEGARS

Many chefs spoke highly of the high-quality vinegars now on the market, from aged balsamics and balsamic syrup (a reduction made by cooking down balsamic in a saucepan) to products made from grape must, the skin and pulp of wine grapes. A cult favorite of chefs is Minus 8 vinegar. Made in Canada from frozen grapes, it has a concentrated, almost raisin-like taste that is mellower and richer than regular vinegar.

Where to get it: minus8vinegar.com (\$29 for/100 mL); check shopping.com or the gourmet foods section of Amazon.com.

How to use it: In vinaigrettes, in glazes for meats and drizzled over grilled or sautéed vegetables.

CITRUS SALTS

DO IT YOURSELF SPICES

Pimentón Salt

Yield: 1¼ cups
 ¼ cup sweet pimentón (dulce)
 1 cup kosher salt
 1 clove garlic

- Blend in food processor on high until a powder.
- Store in plastic bag or sealed container.

Citrus Salts

6 lemons and/or limes or 4 to 5 oranges
 Kosher salt

- Preheat oven to 200 degrees.
- Wash and dry the fruit. Using a vegetable peeler, make long strips of the colored part only. Lay strips onto a cookie sheet.
- Place tray in oven and bake for 1 hour, until peels are bone dry. Place in blender on high and turn into a fine powder. Mix one part powder with one part salt.
- Store in plastic bag or sealed container.

Vincent Nargi, the chef at the Odeon in New York City, cited homemade citrus salts as his favorite condiment. He makes them by dehydrating citrus rind, then grinding it in a blender with salt. Lemon-lime and orange salts brighten both meats and vegetables. Best of all, the salts are easy and inexpensive to make and can be packed into pretty jars for gifts.

Where to get it: Make it yourself. See recipe above.

How to use it:

Asparagus: Boil or steam asparagus, then top with butter and lemon-lime salt.

Pork: Pan-fry a pork chop, then top it with orange salt.

Chicken: Rub chicken legs with butter or oil, then sprinkle generously with pepper and lemon-lime salt. Broil for 10 minutes until browned, then bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes, or until cooked through. Finish with a healthy pinch of lemon-lime salt.

TRUFFLE SALT

Truffle oil, often made with a chemical that smells like truffles, has become ubiquitous. But recently truffle butters (made with both white and black truffle) and truffle salt (black truffle pieces mixed with salt, which preserves them) have become widely available.

We found that the cheapest -- truffle salt -- added the most pungent flavor. While a single jar of truffle salt costs more than \$20, a little goes a long way. The secret is adding the salt when the dish is hot and