

GO Nuts

BY PRISCILLA MARTEL

Chefs are going nuts — for almonds, pistachios, cashews, pecans, hazelnuts, walnuts and nuts of all varieties. Once shunned by the fat-phobic, nuts are making a menu comeback, and with good reason. They're great sources of beneficial fats, fiber, vitamins and minerals. Recent proven health claims place nuts at the top of the list of disease-fighting "superfoods." And consumers are getting the message: More than 71 percent of them eat nuts at least several times per month, according to an International Nut Council survey.

From toasted and spiced for salad toppings to raw and ground in sauces, nutritious nuts add personality and flavor to every part of the menu



Ground nuts make a "good-fat" coating for lean protein; varying the size of the grind alters the degree of texture and crunch.

This good news is old news to chefs who recognize how nuts' complex range of flavors — whether raw or roasted, chopped, sliced or ground — offers a palate of exciting tastes and textural contrasts to all parts of the menu.

FRESH HEALTH DATA

A breakthrough 1992 study at California's Loma Linda University inspired research into the relationship between nuts and health. That study of 34,000 people showed heart-attack risk declined among those who ate an ounce of nuts five times per week. While the fat content in tree nuts ranges from 46 percent for cashews to 76 percent for macadamia nuts, much of it is mono- or polyunsaturated fat, the healthy fat that research indicates can reduce damaging LDL cholesterol without lowering the "good" HDL cholesterol. More recent studies indicate a dose-response relationship: When more nuts are consumed as part of a reduced-fat diet, health benefits increase proportionately.

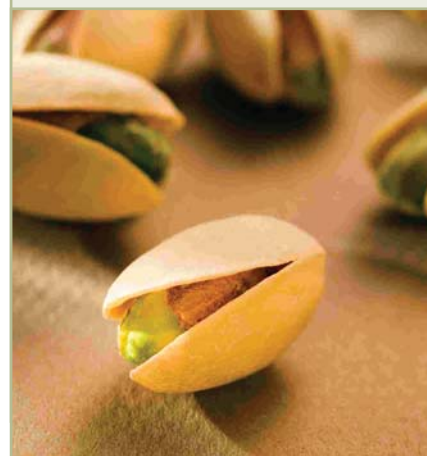
In 2003, nuts were the first food to be given a qualified health claim by the FDA. Now labels on almonds, hazelnuts, peanuts, pecans, walnuts, some pine nuts and pistachios may state that eating nuts as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may prevent heart disease. All nuts are natural whole-food sources of B vitamins, folic acid and trace minerals.

Walnuts, researchers have discovered, are a good source of linolenic acid, related to the omega-3 fatty acids that give fish oils their healthy sheen in nutrition circles. Richly pigmented nuts, such as pistachios, are high in carotenoids and phytosterols, antioxidant compounds associated with cancer prevention. And a handful of almonds provides 35 percent of

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ Some of the proven health benefits of adding more nuts to the menu
- ▶ How different nuts bring different personalities, from exotic to homey, to a chef's flavor repertoire
- ▶ Roasting, grinding, toasting and more: how to build flavor with nuts



CALIFORNIA PISTACHIO COMMISSION



Browned butter brings out personality in toasted almonds and makes a great pasta sauce.

GEORGIA PECAN COMMISSION



Pecans' deep furrows catch spices, herbs and other seasonings.

the daily requirement of vitamin E, a powerful antioxidant.

Naturally low in carbohydrates and a great source of protein, nuts are packed with fiber, which makes them filling. Ongoing studies suggest that the fiber in almonds, for example, may inhibit fat absorption in the body. And there are implications linking nut consumption and management of Type II diabetes.

Further, consumers perceive nuts as an elegant accessory: “great tasting,” “upscale” and “indulgent,” according to market research conducted by the Almond Board of California and the Hazelnut Marketing Board, among others (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: TREE NUTS IN A NUTSHELL

TREE NUT	ORIGIN AND SOURCES	CONSUMER PERCEPTION	UNIQUE NUTRITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS	FLAVOR DESCRIPTORS	TEXTURE
ALMOND	California, Spain, Middle East, Italy, Greece	Gourmet nut; upscale, healthy, elegant	Vitamin E, fiber	Sweet and delicate when raw; buttery flavor when roasted	Firm, crisp bite and distinct snap when raw or roasted
BRAZIL	Amazon River basin – Peru, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela	Tropical, exotic, ethnic	Selenium, trace minerals	Buttery, a little like coconut or macadamia nut	Soft yet crisp bite
CASHEW	Brazil, India	Exotic, the Raj, Asian	Iron, trace minerals	Fine, delicate, sweet flavor	Soft, tender bite when roasted
CHESTNUT	Europe, South Korea, China, Italy, (American chestnut reappearing)	Holiday, European, festive	Potassium, calcium, phosphorus	Tender, sweet, creamy with a hint of maple (never eaten raw)	Starchy, mealy texture like a cooked potato
HAZELNUT	Turkey, Italy, Oregon	Old World, European, distinctive, luxurious	Lutein, fiber, phytochemicals	Earthy, rustic when raw; bold, meaty when roasted	Firm, crisp bite
MACADAMIA	Australia, Hawaii, Costa Rica	Luxurious, tropical, indulgent, upscale, trendy	Thiamin	Buttery and delicate	Firm, crisp bite
PECAN	The South; Georgia, Texas, Florida	American favorite, indulgent	Phytochemicals, fiber	Rich, sweet, maple aroma and flavor	Friable, tender yet crisp
PINE NUT	Spain, Italy, China, Portugal, Turkey	Italian, rich	Linoleic acid, vitamin K	Turpenic, piney flavor	Soft, tender bite
PISTACHIO	Iran, California, Italy	Exotic, refined	Phytochemicals, fiber	Subtle, floral	Firm, crisp bite
“ENGLISH” WALNUT	Asia, Europe, North America	Homey, familiar	Linoleic and linolenic (omega-3) acids	Delicate, woody flavor suggesting maple	Friable, tender yet crisp, with a delicate crunch
BLACK WALNUT	Native to North America, from the Southeast to California	Distinctive, uncommon	Linoleic and linolenic (omega-3) acids	Stronger, richer and smokier than English walnuts	Tender yet crisp

TEN WAYS FOR NUTS NOW

1. Sliced or chopped nuts offer nut recognition, flavor and texture without the cost of whole nuts.
2. Sugar is commonly added to a nut-coating mixture for adherence, but dry heat is often enough to make spice coatings stick — nuts' ridged surfaces naturally "trap" spices, herbs and other coating ingredients.
3. Flavored, spiced or candied nuts make a great flavor and textural addition when added to salads and creamy soups just before service, or incorporated into a cheese plate.
4. Piece size greatly affects nuts' texture and flavor; larger pieces deliver more texture, while finely ground nuts enhance flavor and mouthfeel.
5. Chopped nuts left to soften in sauces and soups become a creamy flavor booster.
6. Use different varieties of nut butters, even freshly ground, in baked goods, dips and sauces, for a distinct flavor profile.
7. Look to nut flours to enhance the flavor and improve the health profile of protein coatings and pastries; varying the grind from fine to coarse alters the presentation from upscale to rustic.
8. Roasting nuts at low temperatures lets heat penetrate without scorching, providing more intense flavor and crispness.
9. Use a toasted-nut oil and chopped roasted nuts in the same menu item for layered flavors; oils from walnuts and hazelnuts are especially flavorful.

10. Consider the nut variety's origin for culinary inspiration; almonds are an excellent choice for on-trend Spanish applications, while pecans are a natural complement to dishes from the American South.



AZAR FOODSERVICE

FLAVOR-BUILDING BASICS

Consider the taste difference between a raw almond and a roasted hazelnut. The raw almond is subtle, with a sweet floral bouquet that is easily overpowered, while the hazelnut is pronounced and assertive, a great foil for intense flavors like bitter chocolate. Flavor in nuts is determined both by the type of nut and its form. From raw to roasted, there is a whole spectrum of flavors that can be created with any nut.

Raw nuts such as almonds, Brazil nuts, hazelnuts, pecans, pistachios and walnuts are covered with a papery skin. When chopped or sliced, the skin provides a pleasing color contrast as well as a fiber boost. Think about the way the rippled surface of pecans adds to ice cream's eye appeal. Sliced natural almonds or hazelnuts stand out as a garnish in salads or on sizzling greens, with the delicate tan rings accentuating the creamy inner disks. Thinly sliced nuts are cost effective, too; they offer nut recognition and crunch without the added cost of whole nuts.

Keep in mind that the skin of many nuts can be either pleasantly tannic or downright puckery. Blanching, by simmering in water or roasting and rubbing, removes much of the coating on almonds, hazelnuts and walnuts. Pecans resist blanching, but their astringent skin offers a pleasant taste contrast to the nut's sweet maple flavor. Play up this contrast by pairing lightly toasted pecans or walnuts with Maytag blue or Gorgonzola cheese; the richness of the cream balances the meaty tartness of the nuts.

FLAVOR "CARRIERS"

The gnarly crevasses, deep furrows and parallel ridges on walnuts, pecans and almonds can be put to good use catching spices, herbs and other coating ingredients. A little salt in the formula helps balance the flavor for savory applications.

Many spice-coating formulas call for tossing hot, roasted nuts in a mixture that contains a small percentage of sugar; when it melts, the sugar acts like glue. But dry heat is enough to make flavorings adhere to nuts' surfaces — no added oil or calories required.

Spiced and candied nuts have become salad's best friend, offering a healthy alternative to croutons, an added flavor component to match notes in a vinaigrette and a textural contrast to creamy cheeses and tender greens.

Flavored nuts add interest when sprinkled atop creamed soups just before service. Flavor the nuts

according to the soup ingredients: rosemary-buttered walnuts complement mild potato or mushroom soups, chile-lime almonds bring extra heat to a Tex-Mex preparation, and sage-thyme hazelnuts dress up a cheese-based soup.

Spiced nuts have also carved out a tasty place on the newly popular cheese boards cropping up as appetizers, desserts or an additional dinner course. Add sweet-and-spicy mixed nuts or a toasted nut bread to a plate with dried fruit and three or four cheeses, and you add value, flavor and eye appeal.

PLAY WITH TEXTURE

Changing its form dramatically affects a nut's texture and flavor. The larger a nut piece, the bigger the crunch. Munch on a piece of almond, and you'll experience a distinctive snap. Nibble a butter cookie studded with finely ground hazelnuts and you'll savor the woody flavor and the delicate flakiness but little of the nut's crunch. Use coarsely chopped nuts to accentuate the textural contrast in dishes such as cooked grains or fruit salads. As a bonus, nuts make a great meat substitute in both flavor and mouthfeel.

Adding plump cashews to a curried mango-and-shrimp salad expands the textural complexity in the dish, for example. Play off the textures in a cooked-barley pilaf by adding toasted pecans or walnuts. Add the nuts at the last minute to preserve their bite. All nuts, especially when sliced, lose their crispness quickly when exposed to humidity.

For a totally different texture, cut the surfaces or finely chop nuts so that they absorb moisture and soften, becoming creamy in sauces and soups. Mediterranean cooks have long used this to their advantage to create a family of nut-based sauces, such as Greek skordalia, with ground almonds, walnuts or pine nuts, potatoes, garlic, lemon and olive oil. Italian pesto mixes ground pine nuts, basil or other herbs with oil, garlic and cheese; Spanish romesco blends crushed almonds, tomatoes, roasted bell peppers and garlic.

The pounded nuts absorb liquids and oil, maintaining a temporary emulsion without egg yolks or a panade.

Chopping — or chewing, for that matter — releases the nut's flavor. Pound long enough, and you'll end up with nut butter, an intense creamy paste packed with the essence of the nut's flavor. Use different nut butters in butter cookies, tahini or sauces. Adding freshly ground nut butter also gives body to soups, broths or sauces.

FLOUR POWER

While energy bars and low-carb foods use nut flours to replace wheat flour and add flavor, it's time to consider finely ground nuts as more than mere substitutions. Nut flour also makes a "good-fat" coating for lean pork, chicken or fish fillets. Simple adjustments like varying the grind of the nuts from fine to coarse or mixing nuts can change the presentation from upscale to rustic.

THE POPULAR PEANUT

While the peanut is not really a nut but a legume related to beans and lentils, it still rates high as one of America's favorite "nuts." According to the National Peanut Board, Americans eat more than 600 million pounds of peanuts and 700 million pounds of peanut butter each year. Peanuts account for two-thirds of all snack "nuts" consumed in the United States, and, like tree nuts, are making their way into more menu applications — from soups and sauces to crusts and croquettes — all the time.



NATIONAL PEANUT BOARD

NUT PURCHASING & HANDLING TIPS

Whole, raw shelled nuts should be **UNIFORM IN SIZE AND COLOR**, which indicates proper sorting and grading.

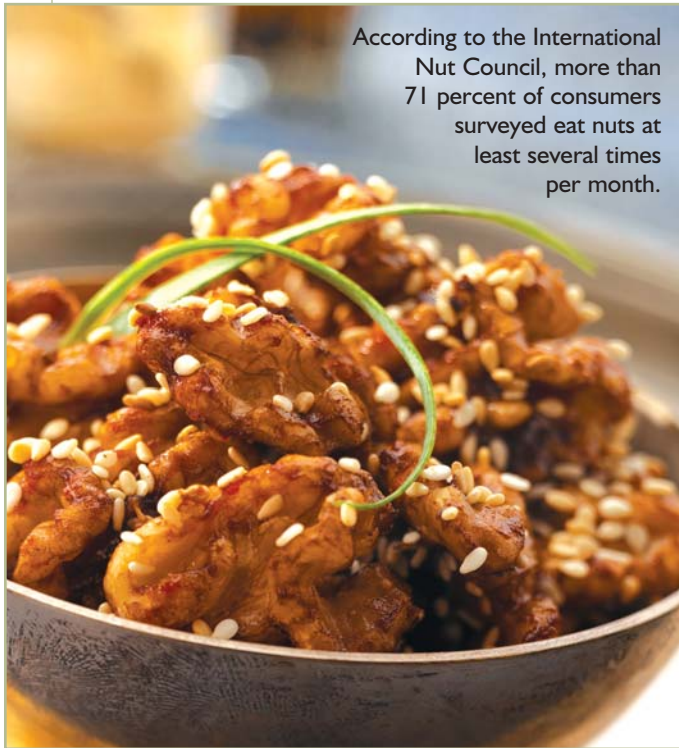
Nuts retain flavor and freshness when **STORED UNDER COOL, DRY CONDITIONS**. Low light, 55 to 65 percent relative humidity and temperatures between 32°F and 38°F are recommended.

When properly stored, **UNOPENED PACKAGES** of shelled nuts last up to one year.

OPENED PACKAGES of shelled nuts have a six-month shelf life when stored properly at the temperatures listed above or when frozen in airtight containers.

ROAST NUTS just before using to retain fresh nut taste and prevent rancidity.

FREEZING NUTS prevents the oil from leaching out and makes them easier to grind into flour in a mill or food processor.



DIAMOND FOODS INC.

According to the International Nut Council, more than 71 percent of consumers surveyed eat nuts at least several times per month.

The pronounced flavor of hazelnuts, pecans and walnuts translates well in any crust when nut flour is used. You can improve a simple biscuit or scone by replacing a percentage of the wheat flour with hazelnut flour. Reducing refined carbohydrates is but a byproduct of this technique.

The secret ingredient in Hungarian sponge cakes and classic pastries is almond or hazelnut flour. The fluffy nut flour binds water, tenderizing a cake to give it an airy texture. Switching the personality of a butter cake from folksy to exotic is as simple as folding finely ground pistachios into the batter before baking.

Marzipan, a confection made from raw ground almonds and sugar, is like edible modeling clay; tinted, it can be sculpted into realistically shaped confections or give a porcelain finish to brownies, petit fours or formal cakes. It also adds a layer of intense amaretto flavor when tucked inside a pie or tart.

EXPANDING FLAVOR PROFILES

The complex flavor of nuts comes from both the carbohydrate and the fat content. Roasting nuts at a low temperature lets heat penetrate without scorching the surfaces, intensifying volatile flavors, reducing any moisture and crisping the flesh. As sugars in the nuts caramelize, the nuts darken and lose their sweetness. Color is a good indication of sweetness; the darker the nut, the less sweet it will taste.

Walnuts and hazelnuts yield especially flavorful oils when roasted. To layer nut flavors, consider using toasted-nut oil and chopped roasted nuts in the same preparation, such as a salad dressing or a pan-reduction sauce. Nuts also respond well to sauteing. Browned butter brings out personality in toasted almonds, hazelnuts, pecans or walnuts.

Because of their high starch content, chestnuts are unique among tree nuts in that they must be cooked or roasted before eating. Bitter when raw, chestnuts resemble sweet, firm potatoes when cooked and make a great soup ingredient, softening as they linger in liquid. Simmer chestnuts gently in light sugar syrup to bring out their haunting maple flavor.

A NUTTY WORLD

Tree nuts have great synergy with ethnic menu concepts. Look to the origin of the nut for recipe inspiration. Macadamias are native to Australia and also grown in Hawaii; they pair well with fish from the Pacific and tropical fruits. Cashews are known mainly as a snack, except in India, where the world's leading producer also makes good culinary use of the nuts by tossing them into curries and sweets.

No country has more culinary uses for almonds than Spain, once the leading almond-producing country and now second to the United States. From creamy ajo blanco (garlic-almond soup) to olive-oil-fried Marconas and almond-stuffed squid, Spanish cuisine provides hundreds of ways to use almonds, and the current craze for tapas and all things Spanish has just begun to tap the almond's potential.

Long the workhorse of the bakeshop and the snack bowl, nuts are stepping into the center of the plate, where their health benefits, personality, textures and rich flavors are a welcome addition. We've learned time and again that consumers won't sacrifice flavor for health. With more nuts on the menu, they don't have to. ☺

PRISCILLA MARTEL, *author, foodservice educator and consultant, provides product and menu development and marketing services; she can be e-mailed at info@allabout-food.com.*

TAKE-AWAY TIPS

- ▶ **BRANCH OUT:**
Try the less-used Brazil nut or pistachio for new flavor profiles
- ▶ **SOUPED UP:**
Top creamy soups with flavored nuts for texture, flavor and visual interest