

# All About Oils

Here's everything you need to know about selecting, using, and storing cooking oils.

BY KATHLEEN BRENNAN

## VEGETABLE OIL

**Best For:** Baking, sautéing, and frying. "Vegetable oil" is a generic term that encompasses any edible oil made from plant sources, including nuts, seeds, grains, beans, and olives. Cooking oils labeled "vegetable oil" are usually made from soybeans, but they can also be made from other substances or a blend of several. Most commercially available vegetable oils have been refined, bleached, and deodorized so that they have a neutral flavor and high smoking point.

## CORN OIL

**Best For:** Frying and baking. Compounds in corn oil can taste sour at room temperature, as when used in mayonnaise or dressings. When heated, these same compounds change for the better, so food fried in corn oil tastes great.



## EXTRA-VIRGIN OLIVE OIL

**Best For:** Sautéing, dressings, and finishing dishes. Extra-virgin olive oil, made from the first cold-pressing of olives, is the highest grade, and it can taste grassy, peppery, buttery, or even nutty. Uncooked applications let these flavors shine; when heated, many of the oil's flavors disappear.



## AVOCADO OIL

**Best For:** Finishing drizzles (unrefined); sautéing and frying (refined). Unrefined avocado oil has a buttery, grassy flavor that shines on its own. Refined avocado oil has a neutral taste and the highest smoking point of any cooking oil.



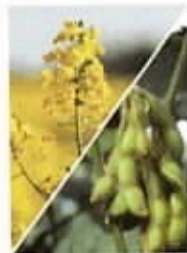
## COCONUT OIL

**Best For:** Baking and sautéing. Unrefined coconut oil has a strong coconut flavor. We prefer refined coconut oil, which is versatile and virtually odorless—a great vegan alternative to butter.



## CANOLA OIL AND SOYBEAN OIL

**Best For:** Baking, sautéing, and uncooked applications. Note that some cooks detect fishy or metallic aromas when these oils are heated.



## PEANUT OIL

**Best For:** Baking, sautéing, and frying. Just be aware that it costs twice as much as canola or corn oil and is off-limits for people with peanut allergies.



## TOASTED SESAME OIL

**Best For:** Dressings, sauces, sautéing, and finishing dishes. Toasted sesame oil is great for adding deep, nutty flavor to meat, fish, or vegetables. Don't substitute plain sesame oil (which is flavorless) for toasted sesame oil.



## RICE BRAN OIL

**Best For:** Sautéing and frying. Refined rice bran oil has a high smoking point and mild flavor that make it ideal for cooking at high temperatures. We've found it to be a superior alternative to canola oil, though it's nearly twice as expensive.



## WALNUT OIL

**Best For:** Sauces, vinaigrettes, and finishing dishes. Toasty unrefined walnut oil adds character when tossed with grains, pasta, or vegetables or incorporated into sauces or vinaigrettes. Avoid if you have tree-nut allergies.



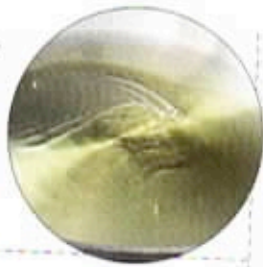
## Visual Cues for Cooking with Oil

The temperature of your oil can make a big difference in the flavor and texture of the food you cook in it. Here's a guide to the different terms we use when cooking in oil, what temperatures they correspond to, and some visual cues to help you see whether you've hit the mark.

### Shimmering

Describes oil that has been heated to about 275 degrees. We heat oil to shimmering mostly when shallow-frying cutlets.

**Visual Cue:** Oil gleams and moves in ripples around the pan.



### Bubbling

We generally deep-fry food at a starting temperature between 325 and 375 degrees—we've found that these temperatures are best for generating a light, crispy texture. Once the food is added to the oil, the temperature will drop; as the food cooks, the oil

should remain somewhere between 250 and 325 degrees (depending on your recipe).

**PRO TIP:** For the most accurate results, use a clip-on probe thermometer to monitor your oil temperature.



**Visual Cue:** Oil sizzles and fine bubbles appear when you drop in food.

### Smoking

Describes oil that has been heated to its smoking point, which can vary between 350 and 520 degrees. We heat oil to smoking when we want quick, even, and thorough browning while searing a steak or stir-frying. If the oil is below the smoking point when the food is added, browning will take too long and the food will overcook. Don't worry too much about overheating the oil; as long as you have your food at the ready, there's little risk since the oil will cool quickly once you add the food. If you have overheated it, you'll know because the oil will turn dark. In those cases, throw out the oil and start over.



**Visual Cue:** Multiple wisps of smoke rise from the pan.

## Why Smoking Points Matter

The smoking point of an oil is the temperature at which the oil begins to smoke and break down. Because oil that has reached its smoking point can acquire a burnt, bitter flavor, it's important to know if an oil's smoking point is appropriate for your intended cooking method. (If you're not heating the oil for a recipe, its smoking point is irrelevant.) The exact smoking point of an oil is determined by the volume of free fatty acids it contains. The more free fatty acids, the lower the smoking point. Oils with a smoking point of 400 degrees or higher are more versatile for a range of applications and can be used for high-heat cooking methods such as searing, stir-frying, and deep frying. Although the exact smoking point for each type of oil can vary due to fluctuations in composition, volume, and the environment, among other things, the following temperatures are good guidelines.

OIL	SMOKING POINT
Avocado, Refined	520°F
Safflower, Refined	510°F
Rice Bran	490°F
Vegetable (100% Soybean)	460°F
Peanut, Refined Corn, Refined Sesame, Plain	450°F
Grapeseed	420°F
Canola, Refined Coconut, Refined	400°F
Avocado, Unrefined	375°F–400°F
Extra-Virgin Olive	375°F
Sesame, Toasted Coconut, Unrefined	350°F

## BEST PURCHASING AND STORAGE PRACTICES

All oil will eventually go rancid. To ensure that your oil can be used—and for as long as possible—we have a few tips.

### 1 LOOK FOR A HARVEST DATE

The age of the oil is important. For many vegetable oils, it's not possible to find out when they were made. But when it comes to buying olive oil, you can often find the harvest date printed on the label of high-end oils and some supermarket olive oils such as our winners, which are made by Bertolli and California Olive Ranch. Check this date to ensure that you're securing the freshest bottle possible. Alternatively, some labels cite an expiration date, which producers typically calculate as two years from harvesting.

### 2 MONITOR HOW LONG YOU'VE HAD THE OIL

Unopened olive oil can go rancid one year after the harvest date. Once opened, olive oil has a shelf life of about three months. Vegetable, canola, corn, and peanut oils have longer shelf lives; they should be replaced four months after opening.

### 3 BUY ONLY WHAT YOU'LL USE

Regardless of the type of oil, don't buy in bulk unless you plan to use all that oil within its shelf life.



### 4 KEEP OIL IN A COOL, DARK PLACE

To maximize shelf life, move oil containers off your countertop and away from the stove, as heat and sunlight can accelerate the oxidation process. It's better to keep oil in a cool, dark pantry or cupboard or, as Eric Decker, a professor in the Department of Food Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, recommends, in the refrigerator, where cold temperatures will really slow oxidation. Once refrigerated, oils keep for about six months after opening. Just be aware that some oils may solidify in the cold and must be warmed before use. A dark bottle can also help impede oxidation, so consider buying products that come in one.