

Cooking with Unrefined Oils

Refined oils, even supposed “healthy” ones like canola, sunflower and safflower oils go through extensive processing before reaching our plates. Most of their nutritional value has been removed or seriously compromised by high-heat processing and filtration. (Murray, 2005)

For everyday cooking, choose cold-pressed, unrefined, non-hydrogenated, organic oils, appropriate to the dish and cooking method. Keep in mind that smoke points are always a range, never exact—always heat oil until it just begins to shimmer and never beyond this point (Meyer, 2012).

Medium – High Heat:

Avocado Oil (extra virgin): is one of the best vegetable fats for for high heat methods. The smoke point is around 480°F. Look for bright green varieties, as they are highest in healthful chlorophyll (Wong, Requejo-Jackman and Woolf, 2010).

Coconut Oil: is a good choice for dishes cooked at medium-high heat. Its smoke point varies by variety (between 300°F-450°F) (Spectrum Organics; Murray, 2005). Though once shunned for its high concentration of saturated fat, it is made of medium-chain fatty acids (different than those in animals foods), which have a beneficial effect on cholesterol, raise metabolic rate and boost immunity (Murray, 2005). Experiment with different brands, as the odor and flavor will vary.

Palm (Fruit) Oil: should not be confused with palm kernel oil, which can only be obtained through chemical extraction and it nearly always refined (Weil, 2005). Palm fruit oil, a traditional cooking oil in Brazil, is golden-red in hue from beta-carotene (it’s the richest natural source). It is also rich in vitamin E and co-enzyme Q10. Similar to coconut oil, palm oil is largely comprised of medium-chain fatty acids, which have a similarly positive effect on cholesterol and help to prevent heart disease. Also, like coconut oil, it can be heated to high temperatures without denaturing (Wood, 2010). Sustainability is an issue—do your research to ensure that you are purchasing an environmentally friendly, ethically produced product (Brown and Jacobson, 2005).

Macadamia Nut Oil: also has a very high smoke point (450°F), owing to its particularly low concentration of polyunsaturated fat. It is quite rich in antioxidants, especially vitamin E (Murray, 2005). Its mellow, buttery flavor is suitable for most dishes as well as in baked goods.

Low - Medium Heat:

Sesame Oil (untoasted): is a mild, nutty option for medium-heat sautés and sauces and is especially at home in Asian dishes. It is less prone to rancidity than many other oils, thanks to very high amounts of antioxidants, particularly the liganan, Sesamin (Murray, 2005). Smoke point is between 250°F to 350°F (Spectrum Organics; Wood, 2010).

Olive Oil (extra virgin): a staple throughout the Mediterranean, this flavorful oil can range greatly in flavor from fruity, to spicy or grassy. It is somewhat prone to rancidity so take care to keep away from light, heat and air. It has been shown to prevent atherosclerosis and shows evidence of aiding in the prevention and treatment of asthma, arthritis and cancer (Murray, 2005). In addition, olive oil supports a healthy liver and gall bladder (Wood, 2010). The smoke point is around 325°F (Spectrum Organics).

No – Low Heat:

Nut Oils (walnut, hazelnut*, almond, pistachio, etc.): Aromatic and flavorful nut oils are very high in monounsaturated fats and can go rancid fairly quickly. Keep them in the fridge and use in dressings, sauces or as finishing oil. Smoke points are quite low—walnut oil is especially delicate owing to its very high concentration of omega-3 fatty acids (Murray, 2005). *Hazelnut oil is more stable than other nut oils. Medium heat may be applied (Wood, 2010).

Flax Seed Oil: This nutty, vegetal tasting oil is exceptionally high in omega-3 fatty acids and lignans. These compounds have been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer (especially breast cancer) and to retard tumor growth. Flax oil is denatured by light and heat, so store in opaque bottles, keep cold and use only in cold or very low heat applications (Murray, 2005).

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