

Which oils do I need?

Bewildered by the choice of culinary oils available? Angela Nilsen guides you through the essentials you need to keep in your kitchen storecupboard

It's easy to be tempted into buying ingredients when so much is on offer. But items often end up at the back of the cupboard, taking up shelf space, and ultimately being wasted because they deteriorate before we use them up. To prevent this happening, it's useful to know what you really need to buy. In this occasional series, I'll help you to make the best choice of storecupboard ingredients according to your cooking needs.



Making the right choices

These types of oil should cover most of your culinary needs and keep purchases down to a minimum. Choose the ones that complement your style of cooking.

OLIVE OIL

Varies in colour, flavour and quality, depending on the olives and how they are processed. Oil that reaches a certain standard attains the 'extra virgin' status – this is the least processed, has the strongest flavour and is usually the most expensive. 'Olive oil' is a milder blend of refined oils. 'Light olive oil' is light in colour and flavour, but not in calories.

HOW TO CHOOSE

France, Italy, Greece and Spain are the main oil producers, each with their own characteristic regional flavours. So it's a bit like buying wine – taste to find one that you like. Choose extra virgin for rich flavour, olive and light olive oil for everyday cooking.

BEST TO USE

- For salad dressings, mayonnaise and marinades, use extra virgin or olive oil
- For shallow frying (not deep fat), roasting or baking, use olive oil or light olive oil

VEGETABLE OIL

This oil tends to be thinner, paler and milder than olive oil – and cheaper. Unless specifically named, plain vegetable oil is usually a blend of oils. Single-source vegetable oils include sunflower and corn oil.

HOW TO CHOOSE

Although their taste varies and some reach a higher smoking point (see Cooking with oil), many vegetable oils are interchangeable. Popular vegetable oils include groundnut (mild taste, good all-rounder, popular in Indian and Chinese cooking, also called peanut oil); rapeseed (British, good all-rounder); corn (also called maize oil) and sunflower oil (light, good all-rounder).

BEST TO USE

- Groundnut, vegetable, sunflower, rapeseed and corn oils are all good for shallow and stir-frying.
- For baking, use sunflower, rapeseed, corn or groundnut.

FLAVOURED OIL

These oils have either been infused with flavours, such as herbs, lemon, truffles or chillies, or made by extracting the oil from foods, such as sesame seeds, avocados and nuts.

HOW TO CHOOSE

To avoid buying lots of different bottles, infused oils can easily be made in small amounts at home, as needed, by infusing an extra virgin or olive oil with your choice of flavouring. Most infused and extracted oils (apart from avocado) don't have a high smoke point, so are used more as a flavouring.

BEST TO USE

- Infused oils add flavour to salad dressings.
- Walnut and hazelnut are good for salad dressings and baking.
- Use avocado for frying.
- Go for sesame or walnut for stir-fries and dressings.

HEALTHY OPTIONS

All oils contain exactly the same amount of calories (99 kcalories per tbsp) and fat, but it's the type of fat that determines how healthy they are. Good Food's nutritionist Fiona Hunter advises on the best:

- Olive oil has the highest level of monounsaturated fats, so it's the most heart-friendly of all the non-animal fats and doesn't raise cholesterol levels in the same way that butter does, for example. Nutritionally, all types of olive oil are the same.
- Vegetable oils are mostly low in saturated fat (palm oil and coconut oil are exceptions), but contain more polyunsaturated fats than olive oil, so are not quite as beneficial for the heart.
- Rapeseed oil is a good choice as it has a fatty acid composition similar to olive oil and also contains omega-3 fats.

HOW TO STORE

- Keep oils in a cool, dark place as light and heat turn them rancid. Oil can be refrigerated but will solidify, so return to room temperature before using.
- Any oil starts to deteriorate once opened, so use it up quickly or buy smaller bottles to avoid waste.
- Storage times vary. Olive oil can last up to two years unopened, and about a year once opened. Other oils last about six months after opening.

COOKING WITH OIL

When using oil for frying, it needs to have a high smoke point (the temperature it can reach without burning or smoking). Groundnut, vegetable and rapeseed oils, for example, can tolerate being used at high temperatures, and sunflower and olive oil at medium temperatures. Oils with a lower smoke point, such as sesame, burn easily if overheated.