

Infusing Oils with Flavor

Capturing the essence of herbs and spices is as easy as making a cup of tea

BY JEFFREY PEPPE

You can flavor oils with almost any seasoning. Use the author's recipes as guidelines to create your own combinations for personalized gifts.



When I was studying cooking, one of my teachers was a real fan of infused oils. He liked the fact that these colorful, intensely flavored oils (which he made himself) could add richness and character to food without adding the heaviness of butter and cream. I was amazed that something so delicious and versatile was so easy to make.

When I began my own cooking career, there wasn't a bottle of infused oil to be found in stores. I also started to make my own, both at home and at work. Many flavors of oil have since found their way

into my marinades, vinaigrettes, and sauté pans.

Just a few drops of infused oil contain a lot of flavor. You can use the oil for sautéing and stir-frying, but its flavor is most intense if you use it uncooked. Infused oils make wonderful vinaigrettes and marinades, and there's nothing better than a grilled portobello mushroom drizzled with garlic-rosemary oil. Infused oils also contribute to quick meals: Boil pasta, toss it with fresh tomatoes and basil, and add tomato-basil oil to match. Pair the dish with salad and bread and you have a midweek feast.

Photos: Boyd Hagen



Hot method for fresh ingredients. Fresh ingredients, such as herbs and garlic, must be heated with the oil for several minutes in order to pasteurize them, which prevents spoilage. The heat also releases the flavor of fresh ingredients into the oil.

Start by putting the flavorings and the oil in a deep, nonaluminum pot (aluminum can sometimes give ingredients a grayish cast). Heat the pot over low heat and gradually bring the temperature of the mixture to 220°F, monitoring it with a thermometer. Keep the temperature between 220°F and 250°F for 20 minutes—too low a temperature means you might not kill off all the bacteria; too high, and you can scorch the ingredients and ruin the taste of the oil. Also, every time you heat an oil, you shorten its shelf life. You only want as much heat as necessary to get the flavor in and the bacteria out. During cooking, stir a few times to keep the seasoning, which probably will be sizzling a bit, from sticking to the pan.

Once the 20 minutes are up, take the pan from the heat and let it cool to room temperature—don't try to pour hot oil. Line a strainer with two layers of cheesecloth and set it over a clean, dry bottle or jar. Strain the oil into the bottle, gently pressing on the solids to get as much oil as you can without pushing the solids through. If your bottle has a very narrow neck, strain into a jar and then pour from the jar into your bottle. Seal the container for storage, or use the oil right away.

Cold method for dry ingredients. Heat can scorch dry spices and affect their flavor, so no cooking is used in this method. Also, dried spices don't present the same risk of bacterial growth as fresh ingredients. For the cold method, you stir the spices with room-temperature oil in a clean, dry container. Cover the container and leave it to infuse at room temperature for three days. Every day you'll need to stir or shake the oil again so that the spices stay distributed through the oil for a fuller transfer of flavors. On the third day, taste the oil; if it seems weak, leave it for another day or two. When the flavor is to your liking, let the spices settle completely to the bottom

To get the most flavor from your infused oils, use them straight.

Just a few drops can brighten salads, soups, steamed vegetables, even fish or meat.

Infused oils taste complex, but they're as easy to make as brewing a cup of tea. Once you understand the method, all that's left is deciding which flavors to use, organizing a few simple pieces of equipment, and learning how to store the finished oil to keep it fresh.

TWO METHODS OF INFUSION: HOT AND COLD

There are two ways to make an infusion, and your choice will depend on which flavoring ingredients you choose.





For hot infusions, simmer at least 20 minutes at 220°F. Watch the thermometer carefully; if the oil goes above 250°, the infusion can burn; below 220°, you might not kill all bacteria.



For cold infusions, stir... Blend toasted dry spices with oil.

...and let settle. Steep the spices in the oil for a few days before filtering them out.

and strain through cheesecloth and seal as for the hot method (see p. 41). The oil is ready to use.

USE STRONG SEASONINGS AND A MILD, FRESH OIL

You can use any herb, spice, or seasoning (including tomatoes, garlic, and ginger) to infuse oil. It's easy to create oils with interesting flavor combinations to use for ethnic cooking—something hot and spicy to use with Tex-Mex food, garlicky and flavored with herbs for Italian dishes, or aromatic and pungent with ginger to add an Asian accent to dishes.

Different seasonings have different levels of intensity, so exact amounts are a matter of experimentation and tasting. A general rule, however, is $\frac{1}{3}$ cup dried spices or 1 packed cup fresh herbs for every 2 cups of oil.

For freshness, start with an unopened bottle of oil. I prefer canola, but any mild-tasting vegetable oil is fine. Because olive oil will add its own assertive flavor, I like to use it only with other Mediterranean ingredients, such as garlic, rosemary, tomato, and basil.

YOU NEED JARS, A PAN, AND A THERMOMETER

Once you've selected the flavor you want, you need only a few pieces of equipment.

Choose the right container. Both containers—one for steeping and one for storage—should have tight closures. Also, be sure the containers are perfectly clean and dry; moisture can spoil the oil. I prefer glass, but plastic is fine.

Hot oils need a thermometer and a heavy pot. You can't make hot-infused oils without a deep-frying thermometer. A few degrees separate an oil that's fragrant and flavorful from one that's scorched. To

heat the oil safely, you'll also need a heavy pot that's large enough to hold the oil and the flavorings, and still have a little room for safety. Don't worry if the thermometer touches the bottom of the pot; the reading will still be accurate.

While hot infusion is easy to do, please remember that you're working with very hot oil, which can cause severe burns. Be aware of what you're doing, and wait until the oil is completely cool before straining it.

HANDLE INFUSED OILS WITH CARE

Whether you give infused oils as gifts or keep them for yourself, be sure you get the longest shelf life out of your infusions.

Don't leave herbs in the infused oil. Use a fine strainer lined with cheesecloth. Solids left in the oil will deteriorate, which can make the oil rancid.

Keep infused oil in the refrigerator. This extends shelf life and prevents bacterial development. Chilling may cloud the oil, but it's still fine, and it will clear once the oil returns to room temperature.

Check the taste and aroma before you use it. All oils eventually oxidize, which gives them an off taste and aroma. Hot-infused oils will age more quickly than cold infusions, but generally an infused oil is good for anywhere between one and six months. Shelf-life variables range from the way the unflavored oil was made to the type of flavorings you put in the oil. For example, rosemary is an antioxidant, which means it can slow the oil's oxidation.

Heat infused oils gently. Infused oils should not be used in pan- and deep-frying. These methods require the oil to remain at high temperatures for long periods, which would make infused oils scorch. For sautéing and stir-frying, however, infused oils are wonderful; the small amount of oil used is quickly

Homemade infused oils have a freshness and an intensity of flavor that can't be matched.



Both hot- and cold-infused oils must be strained. It's important that every bit of solids is removed from the oil. Use a strainer lined with a double thickness of cheesecloth.

absorbed by the food, which prevents the oil from reaching damaging temperatures. Still, the pan's heat bears watching, since infused oils reach their smoking point more quickly than unflavored oils. If an infused oil starts to smoke in the pan, it's too hot and will taste terrible. The oil is ready to use when you can catch the infusion's heady aroma.

Indian Spice Infused Oil

This oil is spicy but not hot. *Yields 1 cup.*

2 Tbs. whole cumin seeds
2 Tbs. whole coriander seeds
1 cinnamon stick, 2 inches long
1 tsp. whole cloves
1 tsp. whole black peppercorns
2 bay leaves
6 whole green cardamom pods
1 tsp. ground turmeric
1 cup canola or other mild oil

Prepare the spices—Heat a heavy frying pan over medium heat. Toss all the spices together except the turmeric and put them in the hot pan. Dry-toast the spices, stirring them constantly for 10 min., or until they turn a few shades darker and begin to release their aromas. Transfer them to a bowl and let them cool completely. Add the turmeric and then grind all the spices to a fine powder in a spice mill, a clean coffee grinder, or a blender.

Stir the spices in with the oil in a clean, dry container. Cover and let sit at room temperature for three days, or until the desired taste is reached. Stir or shake once a day. Strain through cheesecloth into a clean, dry bottle. (For details, see p. 41.)

Smoky Southwestern Infused Oil

When toasting the spices, turn on the vent fan to disperse any chile fumes. *Yields ¾ cup.*

3 dried ancho or New Mexico chiles,
stems removed and torn into small pieces
3 Tbs. whole cumin seeds

1 Tbs. whole coriander seeds
½ tsp. whole black peppercorns
1 tsp. dried oregano
½ tsp. cayenne
Pinch freshly ground nutmeg
1 cup canola or other mild oil

Toast and grind the spices as described in the recipe at left, leaving out the oregano, cayenne, and nutmeg. Add these to the cooled, ground spices and continue with the technique described in the preceding recipe.

Ginger & Sichuan Peppercorn Oil

This oil is great for stir-fries. Although there are dried spices in this hot-infused oil, they won't scorch. *Yields 2¾ cups.*

¼ lb. fresh ginger, peeled and sliced into ¼-inch-thick disks
3 Tbs. Sichuan peppercorns
1 tsp. red pepper flakes
3 cups peanut oil

In a deep pot, bring all ingredients to 220° to 250°F for 20 min. Let cool, and then strain through cheesecloth into a clean, dry bottle. (For details, see p. 41.)

Garlic-Rosemary Oil

Try drizzling this oil over grilled lamb chops. *Yields 1¾ cups.*

20 cloves garlic, peeled
Two 5-inch sprigs fresh rosemary, cut into thirds
2 cups olive or canola oil

Follow the technique described in the recipe above. The garlic will begin to bubble slightly, and after about 10 min. it will begin to color, but it shouldn't brown significantly.

Fresh Tomato-Basil Oil

Make this oil in the summer when tomatoes are at their best. *Yields 2½ cups.*

2 large, ripe tomatoes (about 1 lb.), seeded and chopped coarse
1 packed cup fresh basil leaves, washed and thoroughly dried
1 tsp. red pepper flakes
5 cloves garlic, peeled
3 cups olive oil

Follow the technique described in the recipe above.

Jeffrey Peppet has cooked in restaurants throughout New England. He is the former owner of Truffles, a gourmet store, café, and catering company in Marblehead, Massachusetts. ♦



Infused oils make inspired holiday gifts. Try dividing a batch among small, good-quality glass bottles.