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COOKING & EATING

SOMETIMES YOU FEEL LIKE A NUT OIL

These artisanal products add earthy flavor, but it's good to know which is best for what

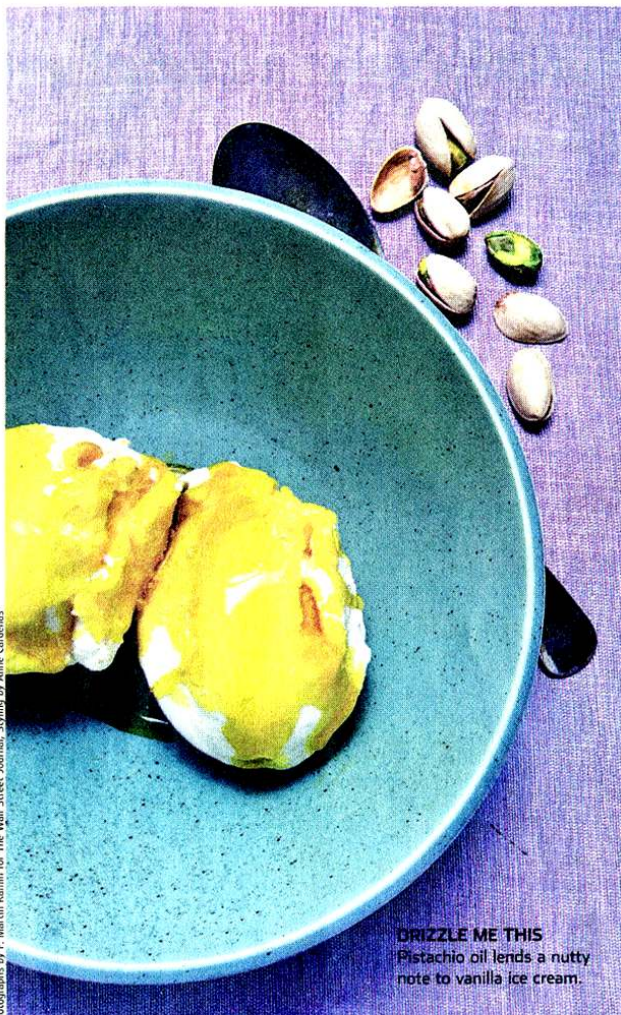
IT CAN BE HARD to buy artisanal nut oils for yourself. They are a bit like fine fragrances: sensual, not entirely necessary and packed in an elegant little bottle. It's the kind of present you might hope to receive from a lover.

But high-quality nut and seed oils are a relatively affordable indulgence and unlike perfume, they taste as delicious as they smell. The oils are cold-pressed directly from the seeds themselves, extracting an essence that is an uncanny echo of its source. French oils set the standard for makers around the world: The best huileries are wildly picky about the variety and the quality of nuts they use, which are ground, toasted gently before a slow-speed pressing and then minimally handled before bottling to preserve the rich character of the oil. That relatively low-yield process explains, in part, the dearth of the result. (Other, usually less pricy, flavored oils—such as those tinged with truffles, rosemary or lemon—are created by adding aromatics to an oil.)

Once you've invested in an artisanal nut or seed oil, treat it well. Use it as you would a fancier olive oil, for finishing dishes—a drizzle on pasta here, a swirl atop a bowl of soup there—but, with a few exceptions, like argan oil, never for sauteing. High cooking temperatures would damage the delicate aromatics. It's also a good idea to keep these oils in the refrigerator to further protect those redolent qualities.

Beyond that, though, working with nut oils can be blissfully uncomplicated. One of my favorite tricks is to drizzle one on fresh popcorn in lieu of melted butter. Warmed by the popcorn, the oil is at its most fragrant.

—Sara Dickerman



DRIZZLE ME THIS
Pistachio oil lends a nutty note to vanilla ice cream.

WALNUT

If you are going to experiment with just one oil, walnut is a smart start—it's flavor is at once familiar and startling in its depth. It is also widely adaptable, lending warmth to vinaigrettes (especially ones with a dash of mustard), new life to pureed vegetable soups and a toasty presence to baked goods. The exceptional walnut oil from Huilerie Beaujolaise has a robust nutty tone that is tempered by a buttery sweetness (\$17, gigachef.com).



PISTACHIO

Every nut brings different qualities to the table. Pistachio oil, for instance, tastes great drizzled atop roasted beets or over vanilla ice cream. J. LeBlanc's absinthe-green version has a heady, almost candied-nut quality (\$48, markethallfoods.com).



PINE NUT

Few flavors conjure the Mediterranean coast better than pine nuts. Huilerie Beaujolaise's pine nut oil, evocative of sun-baked conifers, would be splendid as the backbone of a deconstructed pesto: hot pasta mixed with the oil, a bit of fresh garlic, fresh basil leaves and grated parmesan (\$35, gigachef.com).



ARGAN

Less familiar but no less delicious, argan oil is pressed from the nut of a Moroccan tree and has a nutty brown-butter flavor with a hint of musky herbaciousness. The organic version available from Mustapha's adds a voluptuousness to salads and soups (\$39, mustaphas.com).



PECAN

Pecan oil conjures all-American fantasies. Tossed with freshly toasted croutons, La Tourangelle's light-bodied oil brings a little bit of praline goodness to a salad or a soup (\$20, latourangelle.com).



BUTTERNUT SQUASH SEED

With a haunting and hard-to-place taste—hints of apricot, chanterelles, a soupcon of peanut butter—a finishing swirl of this domestic oil can be just the thing to make vegetables like roasted cauliflower and Brussels sprouts a little more provocative. Stony Brook Whole-Hearted Foods, in upstate New York, produces the lush oil using toasted seeds from the local squash crop (\$20, zingermans.com).

