

FLAVORED OILS

On visit last spring to Napa Valley, I had a memorable appetizer in one of the region's hottest restaurants, La Tra Vigne. Chef Michael Chiarello had skewered one-inch chunks of just made mozzarella and roasted sweet red peppers and simply arranged them on a small puddle of balsamic vinegar that had been reduced to a rich and flavorful essence. For a piece de resistance, he drizzled on a bit of basil oil. The oil provided a subtle richness and artfully brought the other flavors into harmony. It really was a wonderful combination.



This time of year, home canners are thinking about such flavored oils.

This is, after all, when new crop garlic and fresh basil are at their peak of production – and both make particularly delicious flavored oils. However, it's just such a time which forces me to once again bring up a point many cooks and cookbook publishers don't like to face: The USDA is nervous with the entire concept of flavored oils. It's not a popular stance for them to have taken in light of all the chi-chi recipes that have spun off from the simple act of uniting a fine-quality oil with a fist full of fresh herbs and garlic. But they're saying it anyway. Some styles of flavored oil preparations could be risky to the consumer.

Most of us understand that when we can low-acid foods the danger for botulism is present. We understand that the botulinum toxin is produced by growth of a species of bacteria called *Clostridium botulinum*; a bacteria that only thrives in an environment where there is a moist, low-acid food, a temperature between 40 degrees F. and 120 degrees F., and little or no oxygen.

But too many people don't realize that while oil itself is not a good growth medium for these bacteria, things that you add to the oil may become regular *Clostridium* factories. Home-canners may be putting their friends and family at risk because they continue to add moist, low-acid ingredients such as fresh garlic cloves and fresh herbs to their un-refrigerated jars of oil-packed dried tomatoes.

And don't think that just because you are using a recipe from a major publishing house that the recipe has received USDA's okie-dokie. Many cookbook authors and publishers seem just as unwilling to listen to researchers warnings.

In late summer of 1992, Oregon State University professor Dr. Margy Woodburn, who was Department head of Foods and Nutrition at the time, and Dr. Carolyn Raab, OSU Extension Foods and Nutrition Specialist, took a stab at clearing up the questions centering around the issue of oil-based preparations (Are they safe? Should they be refrigerated?). Here is their list of recommendations for the following items:

Pesto Sauce: This is a puree of fresh basil, fresh garlic, pine nuts, olive oil, and Parmesan cheese. OSU's recommendation is that the mixture can be safely refrigerated for a maximum of 3 weeks, or frozen indefinitely (until quality suffers). **Do not store at room temperature.**

Dried Tomatoes Packed in Oil: As long as no fresh herbs or fresh cloves of garlic (or other fresh vegetables) are packed in with the oil and tomatoes, they can be safely stored at room temperature indefinitely (until the oil turns rancid). If fresh herbs or garlic (or other fresh vegetable pieces) are added, the containers must be stored in the refrigerator, and **no longer than three weeks.**

Flavored Oils: Oils containing fresh, low-acid ingredients such as fresh herbs, fresh garlic, or fresh chilies should be refrigerated, and no longer than 3 weeks. **Do not store at room temperature.**

Infused Oils: Oils that are combined with low-acid foods such as fresh herbs, fresh garlic, or fresh chilies (recipe follows), and then strained to remove all of the solids may be stored at room temperature indefinitely (until the oil turns rancid).

With these recommendations in mind, I developed the following procedure for infused oil. Not only has it received OSU seal of approval, it produces an absolutely heavenly concoction.

Garlic Infused Oil

Ready up the French bread. This stuff was made for dipping! The added bonus is that your neighborhood will smell absolutely marvelous during the process.

2 to 3 heads of garlic (enough to have about 30 cloves of garlic)
3 cups virgin oil

The speediest way to handle that garlic heads is to peel away the outer papery skin, then place the heads on a cutting board and whack them with the broad side of a chef's knife or cleaver until they break apart. Similarly, whack each clove to crack it open, then, simply peel away the skins. Add the cloves to a food processor and process until finely minced. Scrape the minced garlic into a pan, add the oil, and heat over medium heat until you begin to see a few tiny bubbles starting to drift up from the bottom of the pan. Reduce the heat to low, and let the oil and garlic 'stew' at this low temperature for 2 hours. Don't let the oil come anywhere near a simmer or the garlic may develop a bitter flavor (I kept it at around 170 degrees F.).

After two hours, remove the pan from the burner and let it cool to room temperature for about 30 minutes. Pour the oil through a fine-meshed sieve that has been lined with multiple layers of cheesecloth, into clean jar(s) and cap. The well-strained oil may be stored at room temperature indefinitely, but if you don't use within a reasonable amount of time, consider keeping it in the fridge to keep it from going rancid. It will get cloudy, but will clear up when returned to room temperature. NOTE: It is very important to keep all garlic bits out of the oil in order to safely store it at room temperature.

Use the flavored oil when sautéing or grilling poultry, in a simple vinaigrette, or when preparing a marinade or sauce. For a quick and traditional Italian appetizer, simply pour a little into a saucer and serve with chunks of fresh bread and fresh vegetables.

Chile-infused Alternative

Combine the 3 cups of olive oil with 3 cups of finely minced chilies (consider combinations of sweet bell peppers, medium-hot, and hot peppers, or single varieties), then follow directions as previously described.

Herb-infused Alternatives

Combine the 3 cups of olive oil with 3 cups of loosely packed, coarsely chopped herbs, then follow directions as previously described. What would be some particularly flavorful herbs to use? The most popular, of course, is basil, which makes a sweet and richly-flavored oil. It also turns the oil a lovely pale green. Less adaptable, but equally delicious would be oregano, or a combination of oregano, thyme, and basil. Chives or garlic chives also makes delicious oils, but the delicate flavor of each is overpowered by most other herbs, so I don't advise blending.