

PESTO, *Refreshed*

Herb-based sauces break away from tradition in unique global variations



Whether as a classic pesto or reworked with global ingredients, herbal sauces offer light, bright flavor options.

Page 1 of 6

IDAHO POTATO COMMISSION



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Since pesto hit the international food scene in the '80s, we've seen plenty of variations on a theme, but with mostly Italian ingredients like sun-dried tomatoes and flat-leaf parsley. However, the idea of grinding together herbs, oils and aromatics to create saucy pastes actually travels far beyond pesto's Genovese origins, crossing borders and changing ingredients accordingly.

"We, as a food nation, have grown above the standard basil pesto," notes Scott Adair, corporate chef at SupHerb Farms in Turlock, Calif. "We are constantly developing new pastes as prototypes that showcase current trends in food."

He points to SupHerb's basil sorrel as a way to add a "zesty twist" and lemon notes to standard pestos; the company's Asian and Latin pastes take the pesto idea around the globe with ingredients like chile and cilantro.

Whether slightly reworked or given a global overhaul, these aromatic kitchen workhorses are as versatile as they are flavorful. Asia, Europe and Latin America each has its favorite blends, which are integral to the distinct culinary cultures but have infiltrated all segments of the food industry. Manufacturer innovations also let multi-unit operations deliver globally inspired sauces, often morphing them to fit the brand's flavor profile.

FIRST IN FRESHNESS

"Herb-based sauces are definitely growing in popularity, especially in ethnic foods," observes Dan Hemming, senior food technologist at Omaha, Neb.-based ConAgra Foods. "People are demanding fresh food, and herbs are a visual cue for freshness."

"Chimichurri is a great example of an herb sauce that is getting a lot of attention right now. It can be used as a marinade, a dressing, a base for soup and, of course a sauce to be poured directly over meats, sautéed vegetables and more."

Matthew Burton, director of culinary innovation for ConAgra, sees "deconstructed" sauces coming to the forefront, as restaurateurs break sauces down into components, such as an herb puree, a citrus oil and a tomato coulis. This approach allows for unique plate presentations and a more interactive dining experience, as the customer "builds" the taste of the sauce while dipping and mixing, element by element.

SUPPORTING THE HERBAL REVOLUTION

It is a great time for herb and spice companies. Demand for herb-based dishes and sauces is high, and manufacturers are working hard behind the scenes to step up creative support and innovative products.

Frozen herbs are arguably the closest to fresh, because most of their color and volatile oils are kept intact.

"Our herbs have a 95 percent volatile-oil count, where most dry [herbs] have around 5 percent volatile-oil count," Adair explains.

SupHerb's culinary herb pastes provide user-friendly ways for foodservice operators to add fresh-tasting elements. The pastes also offer some big advantages over using freshly chopped herbs. Pre-chopping herbs for mise en place causes them to oxidize and brown quickly, sometimes within minutes, and with this discoloration comes flavor changes. IQF herbs are already cut according to very exacting specifications and can be used frozen, so the basil pieces retain their brilliant green color until the last drop in a container, if kept properly stored.

Frozen options also allow for propriety creations. The San Francisco-based multi-unit Pasta Pomodoro uses IQF herb blends to save time, reduce the number of inventory items, minimize waste and ensure consistency in the signature salsa verde the concept serves with bread to every guest. It uses the same salsa-verde mixture as a flavor enhancer for dishes across the menu and as a garnish on some.

Chef David Bolosan, director of purchasing at Pasta Pomodoro, notes that food-safety concerns have led most major chains to switch to frozen herbs instead of fresh. He adds that working closely with manufacturing partners makes for the safest supply possible.

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ How ethnic food trends are fueling interest in a new generation of herb-based signature sauces
- ▶ Fresh, IQF and shade-dried herbs — a style to meet every operation's needs
- ▶ Ingredient variations that take pesto around the world, using Asian, Latin, Caribbean or Greek flavors



HERBAL SAUCES

Six Ways



AISI'S STEEL PACKAGING COUNCIL

- 1 **Bright Marinades.** Herb purees add not only complexity of flavor, but also spectacular colors. Give a quick blanch to a mixture of fresh, flat-leaf parsley, oregano and thyme; shock in ice water and drain. Then blend with garlic and black pepper. Reserve some of the blended herbs to emulsify with oil for a sauce. Use the rest to marinate halibut or similar fish before grilling or broiling.
- 2 **Variegated Mashed Potato.** Flavored mashed potatoes have been done time and time again. Instead of mixing in the usual roasted garlic in the kitchen, how about folding a small pool of herbal-oil pastes into mashed potatoes for a variegated effect? Think chimichurri-smashed potatoes, salsa-verde swirl or garam-masala-mashed Yukon Gold puree. This idea works equally well with rice and other vegetable purees.
- 3 **Crust Adhesive.** Forget the classic flour-and-egg-wash crusting procedure and replace the egg wash with an herb puree. It's the same process, but now you have a flavorful layer for adhesion. Think of a mustard greens-oil-and-nut emulsion on chicken or ginger, coconut and lime zest on pork.
- 4 **Herbal Dough Laminate.** Both sweet and savory laminated doughs can benefit from herbal pungency. For doughs like puff pastry, make an herbed compound butter and chill to fold in. Readymade doughs can be slathered with herb pastes and layered to create a colorful flavor-packed crust. Cookies are also awesome with a swirl: Roll out the dough, spread paste and roll up; then wrap, slice and bake.
- 5 **"Cooked" Pestos.** Caramelize onions in a browned-butter-and-olive-oil mixture, cool and add finely chopped fresh herbs, toasted nuts, finely grated cheese and blend well in a food processor. Use as a bread dip, sauce or vegetable add-in.
- 6 **Cocktail Swirls.** For a clever cocktail innovation, swirl a mixture of cilantro puree, Thai sweet-chile sauce and simple syrup in a glass before adding a blend of mango puree, vodka, ginger juice and simple syrup.

Some operators and manufacturers are looking for a more complete flavor solution. This is where products like GardenFrost Purées from Gilroy Foods, a ConAgra Food Ingredients product line, come into play.

ConAgra's Burton works with customers for turnkey solutions that allow larger operations to use frozen herb purees to optimize convenience and flexibility and deliver a product at its peak goodness at any time of the year.

"Choosing the right herbs gives the purees an authentic, fresh taste," says Burton. "For example, we use cilantro in our Latin blend to highlight the cumin, lime and chile peppers, and lemon grass adds a bright, authentic flavor to our Asian blend."

HIGH & DRY

While frozen herbs most closely replicate fresh, there's still a place for dried herbs in the herbal revolution.

"Dried herbs are shelf stable, are readily available and offer ease of use," notes Leslie Krause, director of the R&D team at Elite Spice, a spice manufacturer in Jessup, Md.

Transportation costs are one of the largest challenges facing the foodservice industry, and using dried spice blends where applicable helps reduce these costs. Dried herbs can add a layer of finished flavor to fresh or frozen herb pastes and purees, and are also a key ingredient in many slow-simmered sauces, such as marinara.

Edmondo Sarti, executive chef of Pasta Pomodoro, likes the flavor of dried oregano, because it gives many Italian dishes a distinctive, classic flavor that is different from the flavors fresh herbs impart. Krause recommends dried herbs like tarragon or sage in browned-butter sauces.

There's a wide range in quality among dried herbs, and the dried product's final taste, texture and color all depend on the source. By working closely with growers to ensure a consistent supply of high-quality fresh herbs, companies like Elite Spice can control the entire supply chain.

After procuring the raw materials, the company dictates the drying process, which also greatly affects the final product. There are several methods for dehydrating herbs, but



PESTO-ESQUE:

Simple ingredient variations can take herb sauces anywhere you want your menu to go



	HERB/VEGETABLE	NUT	SPICE/ AROMATIC	CHEESE	OIL/LIQUID	EXTRAS
TRADITIONAL PESTO	Basil	Pine nuts	Garlic	Parmesan	Olive oil	Sun-dried tomato, arugula, lemon zest
"ASIAN" PESTO	Cilantro, Thai basil, Thai chiles	Sesame seeds, roasted candlenuts	Lemon grass, garlic, ginger	None	Vegetable oil, sesame oil	Laksa, galangal, rice wine vinegar
"LATIN" PESTO	Cilantro, chiles	None	Garlic, cumin seed, coriander seed	Cotija	Olive oil	Vinegar
"CARIBBEAN" PESTO	Cilantro, parsley	Toasted coconut	Lime zest	None	Olive oil, coconut milk	Red pepper flakes
"GREEK" PESTO	Parsley, baby spinach, mint	Almonds	Lemon zest, garlic	Dry feta	Olive oil, lemon juice	Raisins
MUHAMMARA	Roasted red pepper, chiles	Walnuts	Garlic, cumin seeds, chile powder	None	Olive oil	Breadcrumbs, hot pepper sauce
CHIMICHURRI	Cilantro, parsley, scallions	None	Dried or fresh oregano	None	Olive oil	Citrus zest
RAITA	Mint	None	Garlic	Strained yogurt	Lime juice	Lime zest, cucumbers
CHERMOULA	Cilantro, parsley	None	Cumin, smoked paprika, lemon peel, garlic	None	Olive oil	Fresh tomato, red pepper flakes, preserved lemon
MOJO	Fresh oregano	None	Lemon zest, garlic, cumin seeds	None	Olive oil, lemon juice, lime juice, sour orange juice	Dried oregano, dried pepper flakes





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Elite uses a shade-drying method to maintain their natural color and flavor.

HERBAL OUTLOOK

Herb-based sauces are a way to lighten up the sauce category while still delivering big flavors to the plate. Several herb sauces are poised as menu trendsetters. Chimichurri sauce has a long run ahead, predicts Pasta Pomodoro's Bolosan. SupHerb Farm's Adair thinks the Latin influence will go in the direction of a mojito-inspired blend of flavors. He also sees Spanish romesco sauce becoming popular.

Elite Spice's Krause cites the cilantro-based chutneys of Middle Eastern kabob houses as another sauce to watch.

"Another up-and-comer," says ConAgra's Hemming, "is chermoula, a Moroccan seasoning paste made with cilantro, garlic, cumin, olive oil and chile pepper. Traditionally used as a marinade for fish, chermoula can be added as a finishing sauce after grilling, frying or baking."

Asian flavors are also having a great influence on sauces, and Adair foresees a ginger-sesame-cilantro mix taking off as a protein accompaniment.

The abundance of Asian greens and herbs offers endless options for herb-and-oil-based sauces.



SUPHERB FARMS

Herb-based pastes and sauces allow chefs great versatility both in menu applications and global adaptations.

I am partial to the vast array of Asian herbs and aromatics and predict that Vietnamese herbs — key to so many of the country's distinctive cuisines — will emerge in many new American menu applications. I once had a meal in Da Nang, in central Vietnam, that featured a side plate of more than 30 herbs to add at my whim.

While this abundance might overwhelm the American palate, an herbal sauce or dip made with some of the region's herbs, like perilla, with its mint-like vibrancy, will become an integral ingredient to fresh-herb purees. Asian basil, often referred to as Thai basil, has already made the leap to herb-paste applications, and a recent trip to Singapore revealed that cafes and bistros there are offering "laksa pesto." In this paste, the pungent, mint-like leaves, traditionally used in the city's distinctive curry sauces and soups, are combined with the local candlenuts and vegetable oil and garlic for a contemporary version of traditional fare.

Herb-based sauces are even making their mark on desserts. Burton of ConAgra finds that more pastry chefs are experimenting with herbs beyond the usual sprig of mint. Custards, sauces and syrups are now flavored with herbal infusions or pureed herbs typically used in savory dishes. Basil and rosemary, for example, are turning up in pairings with fruit or chocolate.

We have the Italians to thank for popularizing basil pesto, but the idea of herb pastes is easily applied to other cuisines and will continue to lighten and brighten dishes, from pasta to protein and far beyond. ☺

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TAKE-AWAY TIPS

► HERBS IN A HURRY:

From pastes to IQF options, suppliers offer a range of easy herb solutions

► SAVORY SWEETS:

Use herb purees for a surprising flavor pairing with chocolate or fruit

