

Food & wine

Chefs are pushing the boundaries on pesto

Traditional pasta topper goes upscale

By Felisa Billet
Special for USA TODAY

Every Sunday, the kitchen of Whole in the Wall restaurant in Binghamton, N.Y., produces gallons of homemade pesto. The dining room becomes a packaging factory as a waitress, a dishwasher and two cooks fill and label the containers.

Senior partner Eliot Fiks had no idea the pesto he introduced to the menu in the early '90s eventually would be available for sale in 120 cities and 29 states. The pesto's non-traditional flavors became a restaurant hit, convincing Fiks that it also could be a commercial success.

Whole in the Wall uses a new wave of ingredients — sun-dried tomatoes, chipotle and garlic scapes — to take pesto above and beyond the conventional basil variety.

Fiks is just one of many contemporary cooks and chefs who are letting their imaginations run wild as they experiment with new types of pesto. Traditionally, pesto is a paste made by pounding together fresh basil, garlic cloves, pine nuts and grated parmesan cheese, then diluting the mixture with fine olive oil. New combinations can include roasted peppers, herbs, olives, chilies, a host of nuts and different types of cheese.

Dorothy Rankin, author of *Very Pesto*, is always experimenting with non-traditional ingredients, such as cilantro with sunflower seeds or oregano with lemon zest. Such combinations lend themselves to upscale versions of this favorite pasta-topper.

For John Raymond, executive chef and owner of Roots Restaurant in Milwaukee, pesto is all about fine ingredients and a simple process. Raymond uses the traditional method of pounding the nuts, oils, herbs and cheese, and he constantly changes the ingredients.

"I could talk to you all day about pesto," Raymond says while making three different kinds: ginger and black sesame, arugula and pine nut, and sweet pea.

Like an increasing number of chefs, Raymond believes that basil pesto is too pedestrian. He rarely



By Katy Martens, USA TODAY

Basil and beyond: This oil- and basil-based sauce over pasta is what most people know as pesto. Now a new wave of ingredients is on the menu.

serves the same pesto twice.

Dessert pestos are a favorite for Raymond. He substitutes ginger for the garlic, sugar for the cheese, macadamia nuts for the pignoli and edible flowers for the herbs. He often uses marigolds and day lilies in his sweet pestos, because they offer a new palette of colors. Sweet pestos are used with seafood and shellfish and, of course, in desserts — layered between shortbreads and wafers and topping fruit soups and cakes.

"People are mystified when they see vibrant oranges and yellows instead of the standard green," Raymond says. "Cooking is like having a box of exotic crayons — it never gets boring or stays the same. I am always taking new ingredients and playing with them."

Raymond plans to experiment with a pesto made from chocolate mint, a type of mint leaf that smells like a York peppermint patty; ste-

via, an herb whose leaves have a granular crunch and taste like turbinado sugar; macadamia nuts; walnut and hazelnut oils; and a splash of rose or orange blossom water. He plans to spread this dessert pesto between wafer cookies.

Like Raymond, Sarah Lasry, chef and owner of Tastebuds Café in Howell, N.J., incorporates pesto throughout her restaurant's menu.

"Pesto is the easiest thing to make, and it goes a long way," Lasry says.

Lasry uses pesto in paninis and soup and on top of pasta and fish. Her favorite is an unusual herbed pistachio nut, which she serves drizzled on top of sweetened baked ricotta cheese.

"Pesto elevates any dish it is served with," says Tom Griffiths, certified master chef and professor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. "Its ingredients work well with so many things."

As the chef instructor at St. Andrews Café, one of the five restaurants at the institute, Griffiths instructs each rotation of students on making pesto. He suggests experimenting with herbs and pairing them with different nuts and cheeses. Herbs such as oregano, parsley and tarragon make intense single-flavored pestos.

Using a combination of soft herbs that have delicate fragrances — basil, parsley, mint — mixed with herbs of sharper fragrances — rosemary,

thyme, oregano — creates a complex flavor that will be different with each batch. A garden, or an herb display at the market, can inspire the pesto's makeup.

"Make the pestos now," Griffiths says, referring to the abundance of herbs available in the summer. "Freeze them covered in oil, and they will last for months. That way, you can get a taste of summer in January."

No matter how innovative the pesto is, Fiks recommends using top-of-the-line ingredients.

Though commercial pestos often take cost-cutting measures such as substituting a cheaper nut like cashews for pignoli and soybean or canola oil for half or all of the olive oil, Whole in the Wall pesto is made entirely of the star ingredients.

"We don't skimp on anything," Fiks says. "Using the best ingredients — whatever they may be — is the key to making a great pesto."

Basil is just the beginning

Too busy to make pesto? Check out these non-traditional versions:

► **Whole in the Wall** pesto is an all-natural, hand-crafted line available in seven different varieties: basil, sweet red pepper, chipotle, sun-dried tomato, spinach parmesan, dairy-free, and garlic spike. It's available at gourmet shops, selected Whole Foods supermarkets, and at wholeinthewall.com or 607-722-0006.

► **Stonewall Kitchens** adds mustard and sugar to classic basil pesto. Its basil pesto mustard is available at Stonewall Kitchen stores in Maine, New Hampshire and Connecticut, at specialty food stores and at stonewallkitchen.com or 800-207-5267.

► **Gil's Gourmet** combines baby artichokes, basil, olive oil, walnuts, parmesan cheese and a splash of Chardonnay to make chardonnay artichoke pesto. It's available at gils-gourmet.com or 800-438-7480.

► **Bella Cucina Artful Foods** presents a line of pestos with 11 distinctive flavors. Choices range from arugula/pine nut and sweet vidalia onion to roasted eggplant and porcini and parmesan. They're available in gourmet shops and at bellacucina.com or 800-580-5674.

► **Cuisine Perel** makes three non-traditional pestos: balsamic sun-dried tomato, kalamata olive and artichoke, in addition to sweet basil and piñon. They're available at gourmet shops and at gourmetcountry.com or 800-665-9123.

► **Campagna** offers two intensely flavored pestos: cilantro/pumpkin seed and olive and sun-dried tomato. They're available at gourmet shops and poshgourmet.com or 714-839-7642.