

Pesto: A Quick Guide

What is it?

"Pesto" comes from the Italian verb "*pestare*," meaning "to pound or crush." Most people know it as a thick paste made from basil, garlic, nuts, olive oil, salt, pepper, and parmesan cheese, but it is also made with other ingredients, including sun-dried tomatoes. Modern chefs have also made variations such "dessert" pesto, made with dried fruits, nuts, honey, and oil. Pesto's popularity predates the Roman empire.

How do you make it?

Making pesto is not very difficult, though you may have to make it several times with different proportions of the ingredients to figure out how you like it. Some people like it with more cheese or less cheese than others (or no cheese at all), with more oil or less oil, etc. The following steps will let you make many different kinds of pesto, but if you are interested in traditional Italian basil-based pesto, the ingredients are mentioned above. The amounts given here will make enough pesto for about four servings of pasta.

Step 1:

Choose your main ingredient. This may be an herb (basil, cilantro, mint, and parsley are some of the most popular), a flavorful salad green (arugula or a flavorful spinach, for example), dried tomatoes, dried mushrooms, or whatever else you wish to try. You need about 2 cups (about 500 ml) of whatever you decide to use. Herbs and greens should be fresh and clean. If using dried tomatoes or mushrooms, soak them in boiling hot water for 5 minutes and then drain the water off before proceeding.

Step 2:

Peel as many cloves of garlic as you would like to use. For many people this will be 1-3 cloves, but garlic lovers may want to use as many as 6 or 8.

Step 3:

Choose an oil. Olive oil is traditional, but canola, safflower, and sunflower oil are acceptable substitutes. Sesame oil, walnut oil, and other more exotic oils can be fun for different flavors. You will probably need 1/3-1/2 cup (80-120 ml), but you might find that you like it with as much as 1 cup

Step 4:

Choose a nut (or nut-like item). Pine nuts are traditional, but walnuts are cheaper and can taste almost the same. Almonds, cashews, pumpkin seeds, and even peanuts are interesting-tasting variations. You need about 1/4 cup (60 ml).

Step 5:

Choose a cheese (or not). Parmesan is traditional. You may find it sold as parmesan, parmigiano, regiano, pecorino romano, or something else. Other dry, sweet cheeses like manchego can also work. You can also choose to leave out the cheese entirely — many people do, and the pesto can still be very good. You need about 1/2 cup grated cheese (120 ml).

Step 6:

Have some salt and pepper on hand.

Step 7:

Mix your ingredients together. There are at least four ways to do this:

- 1) If you do not have a mortar and pestle, food processor, or blender, chop all of the solid ingredients as finely as you can on a cutting board. Mix them in a bowl, add the oil, and add salt and pepper to taste.
- 2) If you have a mortar and pestle but not a blender or food processor, grind all of the solid ingredients together until they make a paste, adding the oil gradually and then salt and pepper to taste at the end.
- 3) If you have a food processor or blender, put the garlic in with about 1/2 of the main ingredient (basil, cilantro, etc.). Blend them together, then add the rest of the main ingredient and the oil. Add the cheese and the nuts, blending until you like the consistency (some like it chunky, some like it smooth).

Step 8:

Either eat your pesto right away (on pasta, crackers, bread, or many other things) or store it. To store it, you can:

- 1) Put it in a Tupperware container or cover it tightly with plastic wrap, and it will keep in your refrigerator for several weeks (the oil acts as a preservative).
- 2) Put it in a Tupperware container or Ziploc bag and put it in the freezer. It will keep for years this way, and though it will turn black when you thaw it (which you can do in a few minutes in a microwave), it is perfectly safe to eat and tastes almost the same as when it was fresh. Some people make it without the cheese, freeze it, and then add the cheese when they thaw it. Another option is to freeze only basil and oil together (see below).

How to store basil without making pesto:

You may have a lot of basil (or cilantro, or mint, or whatever) in the summer, but not have time to make pesto out of it. One way to process it that can save you time is to mix basil and oil only as described above, and freeze this pre-pesto in Ziploc bags. When you take the bags out in the fall, winter, or spring, you can add in the other ingredients.

A note about picking basil:

Basil plants should be harvested often — if you do this, they won't flower. Once they have flowered, they start to get bitter. If your plants have just begun to flower, pick the flowers off and they will give you more leaves for use in pesto. Take the newest growth, leaving the plant at least some leaves to grow with.

