

TREE NUTS ADD FLAVOR AND NUTRIENTS TO HOLIDAY ENTERTAINING:

Advice from the International Tree Nut Council Nutrition Research & Education Foundation (recipes)

Davis, CA--Nuts that grow on trees—almonds, Brazils, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamias, pecans, pine nuts, pistachios and walnuts—are one of the world's favorite and most basic foods. Tree nuts are a traditional part of many ethnic cuisines, especially during the holiday season. They provide rich flavors that complement any type of dish including soups, salads, appetizers and entrees. Plus, they're great on their own as a snack!

While nuts are relatively high in fat, most of that fat is unsaturated, according to the International Tree Nut Council Nutrition Research & Education Foundation (INC NREF), a nonprofit organization. Saturated fats, found mainly in animal products, raise blood cholesterol levels, which can increase the risk of heart attack or stroke. But unsaturated fats, the monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats found in plant foods such as nuts, can actually decrease low-density lipoprotein (LDL or "bad" cholesterol) levels.

"We know that the unsaturated fats in nuts may play a major role in the protective effect against heart disease, but other nutrients may also be important," states Maureen Ternus, M.S., R.D., dietitian with the INC NREF. "Tree nuts are a great source of vitamins and minerals as well as phytochemicals, or plant compounds such as flavonoids, phytosterols and proanthocyanidins. Eating a mixture of tree nuts can certainly provide a powerful punch."

The evidence on the healthful benefits of nuts is so compelling that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved one of the first qualified health claims for nuts and heart disease in 2003. The claim states, "Scientific evidence suggests but does not prove that eating 1.5 ounces per day of most nuts, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce the risk of heart disease."

While the new qualified health claim recommends 1.5 ounces per day (about 1/3 cup), portion control is key. Fortunately, because tree nuts have such rich and complex flavors, a single 1½-ounce serving is quite satisfying and enough to add interest to just about any dish. So if you're entertaining this holiday season, or just want to give a new twist to a favorite dish, add a handful of mixed tree nuts to the menu for a taste that everyone will enjoy.

Our tasty fall salad, *Baby Spinach, Pear, and Fennel Salad with Toasted Tree Nuts*, is delicious served alone with a rustic Italian bread or as an accompaniment to your celebration meal. Toasted tree nuts, such as almonds, Brazils, pecans, pistachios and pine nuts, tossed on top of the salad add a particularly interesting taste and texture to this dish.

Pumpkin and Tree Nut Soup is the perfect start to a holiday celebration, or a tasty light meal in itself. Tree nuts, such as chopped cashews, hazelnuts, macadamias, or walnuts, add a wonderful texture, flavor and richness to this soup, replacing the need for creams and other fats.

Baby Spinach, Pear, and Fennel Salad with Toasted Tree Nuts

3 pears, such as Bartlett or Red, or a combination, cored and thinly sliced
1 small bulb fennel, white part only, sliced
2 tablespoons soft goat cheese
2 tablespoons buttermilk
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
A few drops of flavored olive oil, such as truffle or lemon (optional)
Juice and zest of 1/2 lemon
10 to 12 ounces baby spinach leaves
1/3 cup chopped toasted tree nuts (such as almonds, Brazils, pecans, pistachios and pine nuts)
1 loaf Pugliese or other rustic Italian bread

In a medium bowl, toss the pears with the fennel. In a small bowl, whisk together the goat cheese, buttermilk, olive oil, truffle oil (optional), and lemon juice and zest, and pour over the pear and fennel mixture. To serve, place the spinach in a serving bowl and top with the pear and fennel mixture. Sprinkle with the toasted mixed nuts. Serve immediately with bread.

Note: To toast the nuts, place them in a skillet over medium-high heat. Toss them continuously in the skillet until they begin to turn a light golden color. Transfer the nuts to a plate and spread them out in a single layer to cool.

Serves 6

Nutritional Analysis Per Serving:

170 calories; 7g fat; 4.5g monounsaturated fat; 1g polyunsaturated fat; 1.5g saturated fat; 5g protein, 7g fiber, 40% DV of vitamin A, 30% DV of vitamin C, 8% DV of calcium, 15% DV of iron

“Adapted from Escape to Yountville, by Sally James, Ten Speed Press.”

Pumpkin and Tree Nut Soup

1 tablespoon olive oil
1/2 cup roughly chopped tree nuts (such as cashews, hazelnuts, macadamias, or walnuts)
1 small white onion, chopped
1 teaspoon grated ginger
2 cups diced pumpkin (or butternut squash)
1 apple, peeled and chopped
3 cups chicken broth
whole or halved toasted tree nuts, for garnish

Heat oil in a heavy-based pan, add the mixed nuts, onion and ginger and sauté for 2–3 minutes, or until golden brown. Add the pumpkin and apple and cook 2–3 minutes then pour over the broth. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes or until pumpkin is soft. Transfer mixture to a blender and process until smooth and creamy. Reheat and serve in large bowls with a few toasted mixed nuts tossed over for garnish.

Serves 4

Nutritional Analysis Per Serving:

230 calories; 14g fat; 9g monounsaturated fat; 2.5g polyunsaturated fat; 2.5g saturated fat; 12g protein, 3g fiber, 90% DV of vitamin A, 15% DV of vitamin C, 4% DV of calcium, 10% DV of iron

“Adapted from Fresh and Healthy, by Sally James, Ten Speed Press.”