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What kind of oil is best?

By Kathleen Purvis
McClatchy News Service

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Question:

What is the best substance to fry in?

Answer:

Fats aren't one-size-fits-all in cooking. When you pick a fat for frying, you need to look at several things, including flavor and temperature.

Different fats handle heat differently. For instance, olive oil has a distinctive taste but a low smoke point. So it's fine for sauteing, but you wouldn't want to deep-fry in it.

Butter certainly tastes wonderful, but it's tricky to fry with because the milk solids burn easily. You can make butter work better as a frying medium by clarifying it, or removing the milk solids. It's easy to do — simply melt the butter, skim off any foam that rises to the top, then pour off the clear fat and leave the remaining milk solids behind in the pan.

But clarified butter can be expensive because you end up throwing so much of the butter away. For a butter-fried taste that is a little simpler, mix vegetable oil with butter, which raises the smoke point and keeps the butter from burning so quickly.

The most popular frying choices are the common plant-based oils, from canola to vegetable to peanut oil. Peanut oil is popular for deep-frying because it has a very high smoke point, so it can handle a lot of heat, and it's usually cheap. Fans of fried turkeys usually use peanut oil.

Canola and common vegetable oil handle heat just fine and don't give distinct flavors to the food being fried, but they are usually a little more expensive than peanut oil. Peanut, canola and olive oils all are high in monounsaturated fats, which are believed to reduce levels of LDL, or bad, cholesterol. Safflower and corn oil are high in polyunsaturated fats, which also are considered more healthful for cooking.

Finally, you get to the solid fats, including both lard and shortening. It's important to use shortening that has been reformulated to be free of dangerous trans-fats.

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