

Cooking Corner: Trend-setting spreads provide healthy alternatives to butter

by Clare Howard

Rich, creamy and indulgent, butter has been a staple of haute cuisine.

Asked once what her favorite ingredient was, cooking icon Julia Child declared, "Butter!"

TREND-SETTING SPREADS - Joe Kahn is owner of Seven on Prospect, a cosmopolitan grill in Peoria Heights, Ill. His restaurant uses coulis sauces and tapenade to add spice and avoid the fat that comes with butter-laden toppings. CNS Photo by John Henry **RED PEPPER COULIS** - Red pepper coulis, foreground, and yellow pineapple ginger coulis, background, are two healthy alternatives the chefs at Seven on Prospect use instead of butter-based sauces to spice up their dishes. On the right, a spicy tuna dish is complemented with sesame oil, soy and ponzu sauce. At left is a sweet pea soup. CNS Photo by John Henry. Now, the playing field is packed with iconoclastic competitors. Herbed extra-virgin olive oil. Tapenade. Hummus. Coulis. Ponzu.

"Butter can mask nuances of a dish. It can overpower the subtle flavors," said John Palmgren, head chef at Basta and Seven in Peoria, Ill.

"Butter used to be in everything. Now we work with reductions, fresh herbs, sun-dried spreads, pestos, vegetable and fruit purees, infusions of oils and herbs."

Seven chef Trent Gill makes a sauce for tuna tartar with pineapple, onion, yellow pepper, ginger and lime juice. No butter! Sauce preparation at the two restaurants can take three to four hours each day, and few of the sauces use butter.

"You won't miss it. Trent's sauces explode in your mouth," Palmgren said.

Gill said, "I try to combine bright color with flavor and texture. There's zip."

At Seven, Gill makes ponzu, or Japanese dipping sauce, with soy sauce, pineapple, lime, ginger, scallions, rice wine vinegar and cilantro.

In the classic French tradition, sauces rich in cream and butter were filling and sometimes overpowering.

"Without those rich sauces, people have room for an appetizer, salad, entree and dessert," said Joe Kahn, who owns both restaurants with his wife, Michelle. "Not relying on butter opens your palate to other flavors."

Alice Price, director of support services at Methodist Medical Center in Peoria, said the globalization of cuisines and food fusions has introduced an array of alternatives to butter.

"Tapenade is much better for you than butter," she said.

Instead of butter on cooked vegetables, a dash of vinegar is good, she said. For other alternatives, she suggests baking with apple sauce as a substitute for butter. Pureed prunes also work. Make a one to one substitution of apple sauce or prune puree for butter initially and evaluate the results, she said.

"Remember, a lot of the butter substitutes are still high in calories. Don't go to margarines that are loaded with trans fats," she said.

Lisa Salem of Peoria's Cedars Pita Bakery said Lebanese cooking uses oils rather than butter.

"Instead of butter on bread, we use hummus. Instead of butter, use French feta and olives. It's more flavorful and healthier," Salem said. "Many people use feta cheese, olive oil, diced onion and diced tomato on bread."

Palmgren said, "Herbed compound butter once seemed so exciting. Now it's so classical and old school. Trent and I are way beyond that."

BETTER THAN BUTTER

For people who can't live without butter, the options are complicated. A past issue of the Center for Science in the Public Interest Nutrition Action Health Letter makes these recommendations:

- Land O'Lakes Light Butter with Canola Oil for those who absolutely cannot live without butter. It gets an honorable mention.

- Crisco 0 Grams Trans Fat for the best pie crust ingredient with the least amount of bad fat. It has too much saturated fat per tablespoon for an honorable mention, but it makes the flakiest crust with the least amount of fat. Less fat and the crust becomes less flaky.

- PAM olive oil spray and all no-stick cooking sprays make the highest "Best Bites" category, as do refrigerated pump sprays like I Can't Believe It's Not Butter and Parkay.

- Also in the top category are 23 tubs and squeezes like Benecol, Olivio Made with Olive Oil and Brummel & Brown Made With Yogurt.

Best Bites have no more than 1 gram of bad fat (saturated plus trans) per tablespoon. Honorable Mentions have up to 1.5 grams. Butter has no trans fat.

TAPENADE

1 cup kalamata olives

1 cup green olives

2 cloves garlic

1 roasted red pepper

1 anchovy (optional)

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

Salt and pepper, to taste

Yields about 2 cups.

Combine in food processor and pulse lightly.

HUMMUS

1 (15.5-ounce) can chick peas

1 to 2 lemons, juiced

1 clove garlic

Salt, to taste

1/3 cup tahini

3 tablespoons olive oil

Parsley, for garnish

Radishes, for garnish

Paprika, for garnish

Tomatoes, for garnish

Pickles, for garnish

Yields about 2 cups.

Drain chick peas. Place in blender with lemon juice, garlic and salt. Blend for 30 seconds to make an almost smooth, thick paste. Place mixture on plate, add tahini and mix well with spoon.

Garnish with parsley, radishes, paprika, tomatoes and pickles. Cover dish with olive oil.

"Coulis" is a French term simply meaning "thick puree or sauce." For this recipe, chopped red bell peppers are simmered until tender, then pureed in a blender.

SALMON WITH RED PEPPER COULIS

Coulis:

1 red bell pepper, seeded, diced (1 tablespoon reserved for garnish)

1 medium shallot, sliced

1/4 cup dry white wine or sweet vermouth

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon minced fresh tarragon

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper

3 tablespoons water

1/4 teaspoon white wine vinegar

Salmon:

2 (6-ounce) salmon fillets or steaks

1 small onion, diced

1 teaspoon lemon juice

2 sprigs fresh tarragon

Salt, to taste

Pepper, to taste

Yields 2 servings.

To make coulis: In small saucepan, place pepper, wine, oil, tarragon, salt, pepper and water. Cover and simmer until red pepper is tender, adding water if mixture is dry, about 25 minutes.

Remove from heat and puree pepper mixture in blender or food processor until smooth sauce forms.

Return sauce to saucepan. Mix in vinegar. Keep warm.

To make salmon: Preheat oven to 325 F. Place salmon on aluminum foil. Spread onion on top and sprinkle with lemon juice. Bake in oven for 25 minutes. Remove from oven and season salmon to taste with salt and pepper.

To serve, transfer each fillet to a warm plate. Spoon warm red pepper coulis around salmon. Garnish with reserved diced red pepper and tarragon.

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