

Pine nut

Pine nuts are the edible seeds of some 20 species of pine trees. These trees yield seeds of varying sizes, shapes and quality. Some species produce very small seeds; although edible, they are too small to justify a rather labour-intensive harvesting effort.

The finest pine nuts, and also the most in demand, come from the stone pines (*Pinus pinea*), grown in the Mediterranean area. Evidence of their uses and cultivation goes back to biblical times. In Asia, two species are widely cultivated: the Korean pine (*Pinus koraiensis*) and the Himalayan pine (*Pinus gerardiana*). Other species, like the Chinese white pine, Siberian dwarf pine and Lacebark pine, are also harvested, but to a lesser extent. In North America the main species are three of the pinyon pines: Colorado pinyon, single-leaf pinyon and Mexican pinyon. Generally speaking, the nuts from the European species are slender while the Asian types tend to be more sturdy and squat.

The nuts grow between the scales of the cone. They are harvested firstly by collecting mature cones, then drying them in the sun to open the scales and release the seeds. These seeds will need to be hulled, as when extracted from the cone, they are covered in a hard shell (seed coat), thin in some species, thick in others.

Commercially, pine nuts are sold shelled because they are not big nuts, shelling them by hand requires much time and labour. Unshelled nuts have a long shelf life if kept dry and refrigerated, but the shelled ones date very quickly, becoming rancid in a matter of days in warm and humid conditions. The best strategy is to freeze them.

Pine nuts have a nutty flavour and a delicate sweetness. They are best lightly toasted because heating adds character and enhances flavour. Toss them gently on a skillet over medium heat until they are lightly brown. Sprinkle them on meats and fish, salads, vegetables and on sweet dishes like cakes and biscuits. Add them to breakfast cereals, muesli and fruit salad. They also add wonderful flavour to stews and soup. We all know that pine nuts are an essential ingredient of the world famous Italian sauce *pesto*, which is delicious added to casseroles, soups or used as a spread on steak, chops, bread, toast or crackers.

My favourite sweet treat is the *pignoli* biscuit, an Italian specialty confection made of almond meal formed into a dough the size of a macaroon, and then topped with pine nuts. Not only do they look beautiful, they taste great too.

Pine nut oil is a delicacy, valued for its mild, nutty flavour and many health benefits. Pine nuts contain a high proportion of protein (about 30%). They are also a good source of fibre, amino acids, antioxidants and many other minerals and nutrients. Like all the other nuts, their fat is the good mono-unsaturated fat.

Recently I came across an article in a health magazine praising the 'appetite-suppressing' property of pine nuts. I wonder what that means? Does it mean if you eat those delicious nuts, you can actually stop after one (or may be two) handfuls? Food for thought!

The large edible seeds of the monkey-puzzle tree of Chile (*A. araucana*) and the bunya-bunya of Australia (*A. bidwillii*) are also pine nuts. The bunya pine is a large rainforest tree in southern Queensland. The tree fruits every three years and the cone can weigh up to 10 kg. The seed has a hard outside shell, which is very hard to crack open to extract the edible nut inside. A single bunya nut is comparable in size to a large coconut. Every three years in summer, Aborigines from long distances away used to assemble in the Bunya Mountains of Queensland to feast on these delicious nuts. As far as I know, these nuts are not cultivated and are available only in some specialty stores.



*Bunya cones
and nuts*