



Pesto

Pesto is superb with a wide range of foods and also makes a tasty dip. We rate some of the supermarket brands and show you how easy it is to make your own.

Made with fresh basil, garlic, salt, pine nuts or walnuts, olive oil, and parmesan cheese, pesto is a sauce which originates from Genoa in the North of Italy. Pesto is used extensively in Italian cooking, most commonly with pasta but it can also be served on pizza, in soups and with cold meats.

Varieties of pesto

There are many variations on the ingredients used in pesto. Red pesto originates from Sicily where tomatoes

and less basil are used. Almonds usually replace pine nuts in this recipe. In Provence, where pesto is known as 'pistou', it is generally made with olive oil, basil and garlic only.

Ingredients

There is a long-running debate about the proportions in which to combine the ingredients for pesto and whether to add any extras. It is best to experiment and decide what suits your palate. Cashew nuts and walnuts are cheaper than pine nuts so this may be why pine nuts are often at the end of the ingredients list on the label and greater amounts of other nuts are used instead.

Taste test

We purchased pesto in Lidl, Aldi and Dunnes Stores. The judges tasted each of them on plain crackers and then alone without the crackers. There were certainly variations in taste reported by our testers even among the small range of samples we used. We also included a home-made pesto.

Results

Aldi Green Pesto Sauce
€1.45 for 190g

Ingredients: This sauce has 32% basil, 21% olive oil, 6% Gran Padano cheese and 4% cashew nut. The remainder of the ingredients include sunflower oil, potato flakes, salt, sugar, garlic powder and pine nuts. Pine nuts are the second

last ingredient so they are probably used sparingly in the recipe. There are also preservatives and flavourings in the ingredient list.

Verdict: This was the least popular pesto. One of the testers actually grimaced when they tasted it and said it was too chewy like wholemeal and that only a herbal taste came through. The overwhelming verdict was that it didn't taste very pleasant, was too gritty and not very authentic.

Rating: 2 out of 5

Dunnes Cuocomio Pesto alla Genovese
€1.39 for 190g

Ingredients: This pesto is 30% basil, 25% sunflower oil, 11% extra virgin olive oil and 9% cheese. The other ingredients are potatoes, glucose syrup, cashew nuts, salt, pine nuts and garlic.

Verdict: This was the most popular commercial brand tested. Although one tester first said it was bitter they added that there was a nice aftertaste. It is a finely chopped pesto, which seems to be the preferred texture, and there is a good balance of ingredients which are well-mixed. Our testers agreed that they would happily use this brand when cooking a pasta meal.

Rating: 4 out of 5

Lidl Baresa Pesto alla Genovese
€1.39 for 185g

Ingredients: This pesto has 38% basil, 11% olive oil, 5% cashew nuts and 5.8% cheese. It contains 1% pine nuts and 1% garlic which is quite low considering that there is more salt (2%) and sugar used than either of these.

Verdict: There were mixed results when it came to Lidl's pesto offering. While one tester said it tasted processed and bland, another said that the flavour was subtle but hinted of authenticity!

Rating: 3 out of 5

Homemade pesto using the recipe given here:

Verdict: All our tasters found this pesto tasty. One said it was less overpowering but more natural than the other brands and another said that they couldn't taste any garlic but this could be remedied by adding an extra clove or two. The appearance also had an impact on our testers' impressions – they all commented on the fact that this version had a lighter, fresher green colour than the others and that it looked less oily.

Rating: 4 out of 5

Report by
Sinéad Mc Mahon 

make your own

Ingredients

2 cups fresh basil leaves
75g grated Parmesan cheese
40g pine nuts or walnuts
1-2 garlic cloves, crushed
150ml extra-virgin olive oil
salt and pepper to season

Method

- Blend ingredients in a food processor and then season with a little salt and pepper.
- You can toast the nuts to bring out the flavour.
- The amount of olive oil can be adjusted for a thicker or thinner consistency.
- A pestle and mortar can be used to crush the ingredients but will give a rougher texture.

Storage

Pesto should be refrigerated in an airtight container and covered with a thin layer of oil to keep it from turning dark. Pesto will last well in the refrigerator for a week or more. Some people freeze it in ice cube trays and defrost a small portion at a time.