

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, thinner in some species, thicker in others. Commercially, pine nuts are sold shelled, as 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 seal them in air-tight packages and/or freeze them.

Pine nuts have a nutty flavour and a delicate sweetness. They are best lightly toasted as 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. My favourite sweet treat is the Italian pignoli biscuit, made of almond meal formed into a dough the size of a macaroon, and then rolled in pine nuts; they look beautiful and taste great. Pine nuts also add flavour to stews and soup, we all know that pine nuts are an essential ingredient in the famous Italian sauce pesto, which is delicious added to casseroles, soups or used as a spread on steak, chops, bread, toast or crackers.

Pine nut oil is a delicacy, valued not only for its flavour but also its health benefits. The nuts contain a high proportion of protein (about 30%), 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.

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 bears a crop only after it is around 100 years old, then it fruits every three years and the cone can weigh up to 10 kg. When ripe, the cones fall to the ground, each segment contains a kernel in a tough protective shell, very difficult to crack open to extract the edible nut inside, but will split when boiled or put in a fire.

Bunya trees have been around for millions of years and have a strong culinary significance among the Indigenous culture. When the tree fruits 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.



Bunya cone and bunya nuts

These times of gathering were a symbolism of ceremony, social kinship, storytelling, singing, dancing, sharing and trading. Apart from consuming the nuts, Indigenous Australians also eat the shoots, and utilise the tree bark as kindling.

In recent times, one may come across a variety of 'bush food' featuring bunya nut, from pancakes, biscuits and breads, to casseroles and 'bunya nut pesto', invented by Indigenous foods enthusiasts! The nut is considered nutritious, with a unique flavour not unlike starchy potato and chestnut. As far as I know, these nuts are not commercially cultivated and their products are available only in some specialty stores.

Pine nut – Allergies and Weight management

A small number of people experience pine nut syndrome or 'pine mouth'. Individuals will experience a bitter, metallic taste that starts about 12 to 48 hours after eating pine nuts. This taste can last from two to four weeks. Fortunately, 'pine mouth' is not a serious allergic reaction and has no health consequences. The reason some people experience this is unclear, although it could be due to genetic factors or related to the consumption of only a certain species of pine nuts.

Not long ago I came across an article in a health magazine praising the 'appetite-suppressing' property of pine nuts. Do pine nuts suppress your appetite? Do they help with weight loss?

Yes? No? May be? They do provide a healthy combination of fats, fibre and protein which stimulate a feeling of satiety, i.e. they effectively curb the appetite, so in some way one can say that they contribute to weight management. Apparently, some scientific studies show that the fatty acid in pine nuts (pinolenic acid) decreases the rate of food intake by 35%, it makes your brain believe that your stomach is full. Interesting food for thought?



Pine cone and pine nuts

