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# FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT HOTEL FOREFRONT



AMERICA THE BOUNTIFUL

# IT'S RAINING PISTACHIOS

**FLAVOR PATROL** AN UNFORESEEN BUMPER CROP OF THIS HIGHLY PRIZED NUT, POPULAR AS EARLY AS BIBLICAL TIMES, HAS GIVEN LICENSE TO CHEFS TO BE PROFLIGATE IN FINDING COMPELLING WAYS TO USE IT. MERYLE EVANS REPORTS.



"All the good things that could happen, happened," exults Richard Matoian, executive director of the Western Pistachio Association, marveling at last year's spectacular 500 million pound pistachio crop, an astonishing 45 percent higher than anticipated yield of large, high-quality nuts.

"This was supposed to be the off-year," he notes, explaining that pistachio trees have a biennial cycle, producing heavily one year, inconsequentially the next. But a month before the 2010 fall harvest, throughout the growing areas in California, Arizona, and New Mexico, perplexed pistachio farmers began calling in to headquarters in Fresno, California, to report "I've got an awful lot of nuts out here." Why the windfall? No one is quite certain, with speculation ranging from the effect of early spring rains and diligent disease monitoring to "mother nature's twists and turns." But growers and processors are rejoicing, along with myriad consumers who nibble handfuls of the nutritious nuts by the bagful and chefs creating green flecked dishes like squab mole with grits and pistachios (**Sisha Ortúzar, Riverpark, Manhattan**) and pistachio cardamom cake (**David Lebovitz, Ready For Dessert**).

One of two nuts, along with almonds, mentioned in the Bible, pistachios originally flourished in the dry desert areas around ancient Persia and have been a culinary ingredient with cachet since antiquity, when the Queen of Sheba allegedly commanded the entire crop for her court. Pistachio cultivation eventually spread east to India and China, and west across the Mediterranean to Sicily, where they became a favorite in desserts during two centuries of Arab occupation.

The delicately flavored green nuts, encased in an ivory shell that is covered with a rosy hued hull, were traditionally hand harvested and stored for weeks in burlap bags before the hull was rubbed off with stones. The result was mottled shells with blemishes that processors masked with red dye. >





Sultry spices: At Hemant Mathur's Tuli in NYC, pistachio chicken is slowly simmered in yogurt, pistachios, fennel, and cinnamon. Photo by Christopher Willano. Raw pistachios photo by Vincenzo Lombardo/Getty Images.





Clockwise from top left: Potato gnocchi in a pistachio/basil pesto by Seattle-based Ethan Stowell (Tavolita, Staple & Fancy, and more). Photo by the Western Pistachio Association. Pistachio cake with amarena cherries, butternut squash, and farmer's cheese gelato by Bjoern Boettcher at Ciano. Michael Laiskonis of Le Bernardin presents pistachio financier with griottines. Photo by Michael Laiskonis.

In the United States, where pistachios have been cultivated commercially only since the 1970s, mechanical harvesting and swift processing eliminates the discoloration and the need for a red disguise. By 2008, with steady agricultural progress, the United States had surpassed Iran as the world's top pistachio producer, exporting 70 percent of the crop to Europe and China and assuring an ample supply for domestic consumption.

At **Bouchon** in Yountville, California, chef/owner **Thomas Keller** sets a bowl of warm, lightly salted nuts in their shells on the table for a nosh, but most American chefs stock the already shelled pistachios that provide color, crunch, and an elusive flavor to savory and sweet dishes alike.

On many contemporary menus, chefs are pairing the green nuts with radiant red ingredients like beets and cherries to vividly heighten the brilliance. Beet, cheese, and pistachio salads abound. At **Comme Ça** in Hollywood, California, chef **David Myers** adds another colorful accent, horseradish cream; chef **José Andrés** at **Jaleo** in Las Vegas complements his salad with citrus and Sherry dressing. For **Michael Psilakis**, chef/owner of **Fish Tag** in Manhattan, pistachio butter, pickled beets, bone marrow, and pepper cress provide vibrant contrasts for scallop crudo.

Cherries pair with pan-roasted duck breast, caramelized endive, pistachio pistou, and celery root puree at chef/owner **Quinn Hatfield's** eponymous restaurant in Los Angeles. In Chicago, chef/owner **Graham Elliot's** pistachio pudding is embellished with sour cherry, blood orange, and cocoa nibs at his self-named restaurant. For his Neapolitan at the **Omni Mount Washington**

**Resort** in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire, executive chef **Edward Swetz** layers pistachio mousse between shortbread cookies. In New York City, **Yerba Buena** chef **Julian Medina's** dos Marias sundae features apricot, candied pistachios, and cherry salsa; and at **Ciano**, **Bjoern Boettcher's** pistachio cake is served with amarena cherries, butternut squash, and farmer's cheese gelato.

Color was definitely a consideration for chef/owner **Roland Passot** of **La Folie** in San Francisco when he was asked to prepare an all-pistachio dinner for a Chinese trade delegation. "It was a challenge for me," he recalls, "and I said, 'Good, bring it on.'"

Passot presented carrot soup with pistachio/cappuccino foam in a glass to highlight the orange and green hues. For another starter, he rolled spirals of thinly sliced smoked duck breast spread with pistachio-laced foie gras mousse into bite-size lollipops. Lobster salad with pistachio *panna cotta* and mango vinaigrette was followed by duck egg tempura—a poached egg dipped into egg whites, coated with panko, fried, and served on a pistachio/mushroom/sweetbread pancake with pistachio pesto. "The flavors worked fine together," he says. "It was runny, and you had all those pistachios running into it." For the main course, chicken/pistachio/truffle mousse was tucked between slices of veal loin and accompanied by sautéed Brussels sprouts sprinkled with the green nuts.

The grand finale featured chèvre and pistachio tiramisù with apricot coulis and pistachio/black pepper ice cream. "I don't think I'd like to eat that many pistachios all the time," Passot concludes, "but it was special and fun to do." ■