

Lard



[Manteca (Mexico)]

Lard is the rendered fat of pigs. It was so vilainized by the American Heart Association that Americans were afraid to use it - and much of this fear lives on. Now that the AHA has been so thoroughly discredited for promoting trans fats and other sins, lard is coming back into the picture, with top chefs in the lead.

The AHA's claims against lard seem not well supported by demographics. Even at the kick-off show for the AHA's "Heart Healthy Diet", an elderly heart specialist in attendance pointed out that early in his career Americans practically lived on pig fat, and congestive heart disease and cancer were almost unknown then. He refused to endorse

the diet and stated that it might have been better had Americans "never even heard of corn oil".

Even by AHA standards, lard has a better health profile than butter (but they wanted you to replace butter with trans fat laden margarine anyway). I will point out that those long-lived Bulgarians often mentioned in health food articles do their cooking with lard. Today food experts are increasingly rejecting industrially manufactured seed oils, particularly those high in polyunsaturates, in favor of the natural fats we evolved with, lard being one of them.

Lard is essential to accurately present the flavors and textures of many ethnic cuisines, as well as for making crisp cookies, flaky pie crusts and light pastries. Foods fried in lard come out crispy and flavorful and do not become soggy as they cool. Foods baked or fried with lard have a desirable "mouth feel" not approachable by vegetable oils. Beef tallow can get fairly close, but the flavor is not as good.

Lard use has lately been increasing under the influence of leading chefs and bakers, and has also been resurgent in England for recreating traditional dishes. The resurgence is also due in part to the recent revelation that partially hydrogenated vegetable shortenings, formerly promoted as "healthier", are a lot more deadly than animal fats.

Lard is the traditional cooking fat of Thailand and major parts of China, regions not noted for unhealthy diets. It is the dominant cooking fat for Polish and Hungarian cuisines and is very widely used in Mexico and Central and South America.

Of course if you're a Muslim or an observant Jew lard is out of the question - but the fat rendered from the tails of fat tailed sheep is reputed to be very good. Unfortunately there are no fat tailed sheep in North America, in fact most sheep here have their tails cut off at birth to prevent a health problem you'd rather not contemplate.

Buying Lard: Don't. The stuff they sell in tubs in the markets is highly processed, devoid of flavor and is

no longer a natural product. It may even contain trans fats. Render your own - it's not at all difficult.

Leaf Lard is the finest variety of lard, rendered from fat from around the kidneys. It has almost no pork flavor and is often used in fine baked goods, producing light pastries and flaky pie crusts. It is difficult to find locally but you can easily order it on the Internet.

The next best is fatback lard from under the skin at the top of the pig. The product "fatback" though is not lard, it's the unrendered fat as it comes off the pig. Commercial lard in tubs is rendered fat from various parts of the pig mixed together, bleached and processed.

Storing: Lard you render yourself has not been bleached and hydrogenated to make it "shelf stable". and contains no preservatives, so it should not be left long at room temperature - refrigerate (3 months in a tightly sealed container) or freeze (1 year).

Hydrogenation: Lard, like other fats, can be hydrogenated to make it more solid and resistant to rancidity. Some lard is "partially hydrogenated" and contains Trans Fats, but this form is used mainly in the food processing industry. Most "shelf stable" lard in the markets today lists "Lard and Hydrogenated Lard". This is "fully hydrogenated lard" which does not contain a significant amount of Trans Fats. Basically, full hydrogenation converts the non-saturated fats to solid, rancidity resistant saturated fats.

It is appropriate to note that "Trans Fat Free" vegetable shortening is done the same way. Vegetable oils are converted to all saturated fat by "full hydrogenation", then mixed with unhydrogenated oils to make the product softer than a hockey puck.

Cooking with Lard Lard is particularly good for frying things that are a sticking problem. They are less likely to stick when fried in lard than when fried in olive oil. They will also fry up nice and crisp and will not become soggy as they cool as oil fried foods tend to.

Lard really shines when used in cookies, pastries, pie crusts and other baked goods. Leaf Lard is preferred here because of its purity and almost complete absence of meat flavor.

When frying in lard, keep in mind that it's a low temperature fat. It should not be heated beyond 360°F/185°C. It can be reused (after filtering and if it hasn't been overheated) to a limited extent. It has an oxidation index of 1.7, not quite as good as olive oil's 1.5, while beef tallow goes to 420°F/220°C with an oxidation index of 0.86. 1.7 is still a whole lot better than Canola Oil's 5.5 though. For details see our [Oils - Smoke Temperature & Composition](#) page.

Rendering Lard: You can make your own lard very easily. There are two methods, dry rendering and wet rendering.

- **Dry Rendering:** The product of this method was traditionally called "drippings", but few Americans are now familiar with that usage. Lard so rendered is a little darker and has more pork flavor than wet rendered lard. This method is quick and produces cracklings as a byproduct - they're tasty and are called for in some antique or ethnic recipes. Cut your pig fat into pieces less than 1 inch on a side. Place in a heavy iron skillet or dutch oven with 1/8 inch water in the bottom. The water is there to wet render a little fat the rest can start to fry in. Fry, stirring very frequently, and keep turning down the flame as the fat renders out. You shouldn't see significant browning until the fat is almost entirely rendered. You

should end up with a slightly amber liquid and lightly browned cracklings. Filter the hot lard through a layer of paper towel.

- **Wet Rendering:** This method produces a whiter product with less meat flavor than the dry method and has a slightly higher smoke point, but takes a lot longer and produces a product that may spatter badly in the pan due to residual water. Chop your fat small, then put it in a slow cooker with water to almost cover. Keep it on the "high" setting for 6 to 8 hours. Strain out the solids and skim the fat off the water. You can do a final separation by refrigerating the lard in a bowl. The lard will solidify and can be lifted off the remaining water in the bottom of the bowl.
- **Commercial Rendering:** Lard is chopped fine, then wet rendered in a continuous process by steam or in water just below the boiling point, then strained and separated from the water by a two stage centrifuge - not a practical process in most homes.

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