

In Praise of Pistachios

By Kay Bushnell

Spumoni, the frozen Italian treat that combines fruits, nuts, and flavorings, was one of my favorite desserts before I adopted a 100% plant-based diet. (Few people knew then that delicious frozen desserts could be made with soy or rice milk instead of cow's milk.) The green-tinged, flavorful nuts in spumoni are pistachios.

The earliest evidence of pistachio collection and use was found in Jordan and Turkey and occurred over 6,000 years ago. Since then pistachios have been used in sauces, soups, and sweets, as gifts among rulers, and as an aphrodisiac.

If you've seen a nutshell among mixed nuts that is bright pink-red you've seen a pistachio. Years ago when most pistachios were imported from Iran the producers dyed the naturally white nuts to hide harmless blemishes and hoped their unusual color would also attract buyers. Bulk sections of grocery stores now offer pistachios in their natural white shells. The kernels inside the shells vary in color from green to pale yellow. The green kernels are the most flavorful and the most expensive.

Pistachio trees were first brought to Sonoma, California about 1875. However, California's serious entrance into the world's pistachio market was the result of the Iranian crisis of the 1970s when imports from Iran were blocked. At that time only modest amounts of pistachios were grown in California and in countries that had climates with dry summers and cool winters. The Iranian crisis led to the planting of many new pistachio orchards in California's central valley. These hardy, drought-resistant nut trees now produce a bountiful crop. Pistachio trees bear well every other year, beginning when they are 6-8 years old and continuing for hundreds of years—superb examples of sustainability!

Botanically the pistachio is classified as a drupe, a fruit that has an outer fleshy covering over a hard shell that contains a single seed. Pollination of pistachios is accomplished by the wind. Grape-like clusters of pistachios develop through spring and summer.

Harvest occurs in late summer and fall. The trees are gently shaken by machine, and the nuts fall onto canvases spread below them. The pithy hulls are removed, washed and dried. The shells of the mature nuts then split open on their own and are dried once again.

The most healthful pistachios are raw and unsalted. They can be purchased already shelled in bags at grocery stores. After you open a bag of raw, shelled pistachios (or other nuts), store them in a tight container in the freezer to prevent rancidity. Pistachios are especially high in potassium at 310mg per ounce. Like all nuts, they are rich in protein and fiber. Their fat is mostly monounsaturated. Recently the *U.C. Berkeley Wellness Letter* reported that scientists compared levels of cholesterol-lowering substances called phytosterols in seventeen different nuts and seeds. They found that pistachios and sunflower seeds ranked highest.

About 80% of American-grown pistachios are packaged for snacks. Pistachio tree sap (“terebinth”) is used in paints and varnishes, chewing gum, and liquor.

Lately I've been enjoying many recipes containing pistachios. Here is one of many irresistible desserts that feature pistachios.