

Salsa, Chutney, Relish, and Coulis

SALSA, chutney, relish, and coulis are all condiment sauces. They come from different origins, have various uses, and can be challenging to tell apart. The major commonality is that they all add delicious variety to foods! Read on and check out why these sauces are often described as piquant.



Objective:



Define and compare major categories of condiment sauces: salsa, chutney, relish, and coulis.

Key Terms:



chutney
condiments
coulis
piquancy
relish
salsa

Condiment Sauces

Condiments are mixtures with profound flavor that season or pickle foods and often add relish (enjoyment) to a dish. Condiments typically stimulate the appetite. Salt was the first condiment and others are pepper, vinegar, spices, herbs, leaves (e.g., parsley, cilantro, and mint), onions (fresh and pickled), ketchup, mustards, mayonnaise-based sauces, pesto sauces, soy-based sauces, salsa, chutney, relish, and coulis.

SALSA

Salsa is a spicy sauce that may be served cooked or raw; it may be hot, spicy, or mild. In addition, it may contain numerous combinations of vegetables, herbs, spices, and/or fruits.

Typically, salsa has a bright, zesty, and fresh taste as well as a nice fragrance, good color, and a chunky texture. Salsa is best when prepared with the freshest ingredients possible; so many types of salsa are best served raw. The secreted juice(s) from the chopped vegetables and fruits, along with a touch of citrus juice or vinegar, provide the liquid that helps define salsa as a sauce. Salsa outsold ketchup as the number one condiment in the United States for the first time in 1991.

The term “salsa” is Spanish and Italian for “sauce.” Salsa is an ancient condiment; its common form stems from the Aztec version based on tomatoes and hot chili peppers. Salsa is typically prepared using small- to medium-diced vegetables and fruits, ranging from classic mixtures of tomatoes, onions, chilies, and cilantro to mango and papaya scented with tarragon or rosemary. As a sauce, salsa can be used as a dip for chips and as an accompaniment sauce for fish, chicken, beans, and more. Fruit and vegetable salsas are often described as having **piquancy** (a delightfully pungent and tart taste, with a bit of spice).



FIGURE 1. Tomato salsa is the most common form and is typically served with tortilla chips.

CHUTNEY

Chutney is a thick and pungent sauce originally served as a side dish (condiment) to Indian curries. It is often described as a sweet pickle jam, which it is not. Chutney is made fresh daily rather than being preserved as jam. Chutney is not a sauce in the traditional American sensibility. It is thick and heavy, more like a dip or relish in texture. Chutney may be served raw or cooked, with the cooked variety being the thickest. Finely chopped vegetables and/or fruits are the basis for all chutney. Again, the common thread among all forms of chutney is the strong and pungent flavors due to the variety of herbs and spices.

As in many other countries, starchy foods (e.g., rice and beans) are a primary staple of Indian cuisine, and chutneys are a way of adding flavor and flair to otherwise bland foods. Historically and currently, chutneys are used in small quantities as a side dish or dip to add flavor and variety to other foods. Geographically, India is well suited to grow or be in the shipping path of vast varieties of spices, adding to the historical use of spices in chutneys.



FIGURE 2. This thick mango chutney makes a flavorful accompaniment to bread and cheese open-face sandwiches. Imagine how the sweet mango chutney compliments the cheese flavor.

Most chutney is the combination of sweet and sour ingredients. Regardless of whether the primary ingredient is fruit or vegetables, the use of sugar and vinegar are common flavorings, even if other spices are lightly used.

The thick, even jam-like texture of chutney has historical roots in the British rule of India. Prior to British rule, chutney was spicier and looser (less jam-like) in texture, more like salsa. British influence resulted in many fruit varieties of chutney, with the final product taking on a thickened jam- or preserve-type texture. The Indian influence remained with the sweet and sour taste. Many current versions of chutney are still prized for their spicy pungent flavors, but the sweetness of chutney is clearly a British influence.

RELISH

Relish is a pungent (sharp taste), zesty, highly flavored mixture of chopped vegetables (often pickled) and/or fruits that are tart in taste and used as a condiment for mildly flavored foods. Relish stimulates the appetite. Ingredients typically include vinegar, sugar, herbs, spices, and pickled vegetables or tart fruits. The consistency is typically that of a thick sauce or a dip. The flavor is piquant and sharp (sour, sweet, and tart), intensely dill, or another sharp flavor. Typically, relish is not overly spicy or hot but is considered a sweet-sour condiment.

Sweetened and cooked cranberries or boysenberries are commonly turned into relish, but they would not be eaten as a true condiment (to enhance the flavor of mild foods); the fruit relish is often eaten as a side dish. Relish is primarily cooked products and historically has been produced as a necessity to preserve vegetables through the winter months.



FIGURE 3. Sweet green pickle relish, like you see on this hot dog, is what most people think of as relish.



FIGURE 4. Relish takes many forms, including this fresh cranberry relish! When do you usually serve cranberry relish (sauce)?

COULIS

Coulis [koo-LEE] is a thick, smooth sauce made from puréed and strained fruits or vegetables. Coulis is a French term that translates to “strained liquid” and originally described cooked and thickened meat juices. Today, coulis is commonly used as an accompaniment and garnish for desserts, along with many savory applications (e.g., soup, bisque, and sauce). Regardless of the application, coulis is always smooth, is usually bright in color with fresh vibrant flavors, and is typically made with few ingredients to preserve and enhance the flavor of the predominant ingredient. Common types are raspberry, tomato, strawberry, blueberry, boysenberry.



FIGURE 5. Raspberry coulis is a perfect garnish and accompaniment to this chocolate tart. The individual drops that garnish the tart are made with coulis.

COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

All four mixtures share some things in common. For instance, all are classified as sauces. In addition, all are based on vegetables and/or fruits and vegetables (unlike classic French sauces.) Also, all may be served raw or cooked. All four mixtures may be used at any point in the meal and with any dish to enhance (increase) the flavor variety of a dish.

Origins

Differences between the four condiment sauces include their origins. For example, coulis is a French condiment sauce. Salsa, however, is a Spanish and Italian condiment sauce. Yet chutney is an Indian condiment sauce, and relish is generally recognized as an American condiment sauce.

Flavors

Differences also include their flavors. For instance, chutney, relish, and some salsas are quite piquant in flavor because they use intense herbs, spices, vinegars, etc. In contrast, coulis sauces are mild and rely on the essence of the main ingredient's flavor—raspberry, tomato, blueberry, etc. Yet relish can be sour, tart, sweet, sweet-sour, and/or salty depending on the main ingredients—pickles, cranberries, onions, cabbage, etc. While salsa, chutney, and coulis improve and embellish the flavors and appearance of otherwise mild foods, relish continues to be a preservation process. Preserving fruits and vegetables for use in the winter months is still a factor in the flavor and consistency of relish.



DIGGING DEEPER...

UNCOVERING ADDITIONAL FACTS: Tapenade

Salsa, chutney, relish, and coulis are all classified as sauces, even though they all have different textures, spices, herbs, and uses. In particular, salsa and chutney stand out because they can be used as dips depending on how they are prepared.

A tapenade (TOP-en-odd), on the other hand, is considered a condiment—not a sauce—even though it has a thick consistency of finely chopped ingredients, not unlike a thick relish or chutney. Tapenades are never sweet, never thin like a typical “sauce,” never based on fruits, and are not cooked. They are rich, strong in flavor, tend to be salty, and typically are used as part of an appetizer or meal starter.

Tapenades come from the south of France near the Italian border and are prized as a flavorful spread or dip, usually based on chopped olives (black or green). They often include a variety of richly flavored ingredients (e.g., garlic, capers, parmesan cheese, and anchovies). Tapenades are used on crackers, French bread, or as a spread for some fish and meat dishes. The Mediterranean roots make tapenade a common element in meals throughout southern Europe and now throughout the world.

Spices and Herbs

Differences include the spices and herbs used in the sauces. Chutney uses more varieties of spices and herbs than any of the other three sauces. It is not necessarily the hottest. It can often be the sweetest in taste, but the number of spices and herbs used in chutneys is by far the greatest. Meanwhile, salsa is considered the “hottest” of the condiments because of the common use of chilies and chili seeds in the sauce recipes.

Consistency

Differences are noticeable in the consistency of the condiment sauces. For instance, chutney is typically the thickest of the condiment sauces. It thickens due to the use of sugar, coupled with the cooking process that evaporates much of the liquid. Coulis, on the other hand, is the only fully strained and smooth (puréed) condiment sauce. It most closely resembles a traditional sauce and is often the thinnest of all the condiment sauces. In contrast, chutney and relish generally use finely chopped fruits and vegetables. Salsa ingredients are usually cut larger than for chutney or relish. Chutney and salsa are of a “dip” consistency (thickness), whereas relish and coulis are thinner and are not used as a dip. Coulis is the most closely associated with dessert applications.

Summary:



Condiment sauces have multiple origins, come in a wide variety of forms, and have uses beyond that of a “sauce.” Chutney, salsa, and relish all have chunky textures,

typically include spices and herbs, can be based on fruits and vegetables, can be thick or semi-watery, and can range from sweet to hot and spicy. Coulis is a completely smooth sauce, is typically made from fruits, and is used mostly to accompany and decorate desserts.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Why is salsa best served raw?
2. How are chutneys typically used in Indian cuisine?
3. What makes “relish” a condiment?
4. What fruits or vegetables would be appropriate to make a coulis?
5. What influenced the sweetness of chutney?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Salsa, chutney, relish, and coulis offer endless varieties and an even greater number of options for application in meals. Of the four, perhaps chutney offers the widest range of flavor combinations due to the number of spices the recipes include. Research some recipes for chutneys to find other foods with which they would be well matched. The ability to match chutneys as a spread or dip to go with other foods is a critical skill for cooks and chefs to learn.

Web Links:



Mango Chutney

<http://www.chefannacooks.com/blog/2011/09/19/Have-You-Tried-Mango-Chutney.aspx>

Berry Coulis

<http://www.videojug.com/film/how-to-make-berry-coulis>

Indian Chutney

<http://www.indianfoodforever.com/chutney/>

Relish

<http://www.gourmetsleuth.com/Articles/Food-History-994/relish.aspx>

Salsa, Chutney, & Relish Recipes

http://www.inmamaskitchen.com/food_intros/Salsa_chutney.html