

Crack the case

Salvage burnt nuts for surprisingly appealing flavor

by Amber Matheson
Everyone knows how easy it is for nuts to turn from lightly toasted to blackened in the blink of an eye. But what about tapping into the flavors that emerge just before the char goes too far? Chefs are experimenting with the sweet spot in between, taking nuts right to the edge of darkness in the pursuit of a deeper, richer, more complex flavor that stands up to the most assertive complementary ingredients.

* Add burnt almond flour to a *pistou* for additional texture as well as a smoky flavor. Cook folds the flour into the *pistou*, rather than puréeing it, to retain the level of texture. It ends up thicker than a typical sauce, but thinner than a pesto.

* Cook looks for a strong popcorn smell ranging almost to a burnt toast smell when he's charring almond flour. It requires constant tossing in a wok and having discretion. ("It takes someone to give a shit," he says.)

ASPARAGUS SOUP WITH BURNT ALMOND FLOUR PISTOU.

Chef de Cuisine Bob Cook, Cypress, Charleston (\$10, recipe, p. 108)

Bob Cook routinely incorporates toasted bread in his menu, and is particular about the bread being almost burnt, not just warmed on the grill. "The toasting of it may as well be an ingredient in it—that's the point for that almost-charred flavor," he explains. "We can add flavors without having to add another ingredient, just by treating one of the current ingredients in a different manner." He takes the same approach to nut flours. For his asparagus soup, Cook chars almond flour in a wok, then folds it into a *pistou* that offers a strong contrasting flavor. "It's not very often you get a toasty flavor in soup," he points out. "The soup has a sweet onion purée, so we were looking for something that had that acrid, smoky, almost-burnt flavor."

* Char the almond flour to a mahogany color (darker than a traditional toast, but not completely black), then spread it on a sheet tray to cool.

