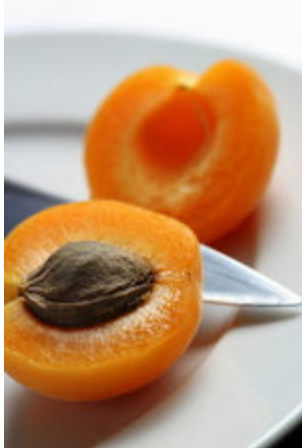


The Oregonian

Stone-fruit pits house an almond-like kernel that's delicious in desserts. But roast them first. Credit: *Angelo Villaschi*



If you're craving almond flavor, it's in the pits

by Linda Faus and Danielle Centoni, The Oregonian
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TEST KITCHEN: Crack open the stone in a stone fruit to find a kernel called noyau

There's a reason why almonds and stone fruits go so well together: They're related.

This becomes quite clear once you crack open the pits of stone fruits -- you'll find a soft little kernel that looks, smells and tastes a lot like a tiny almond.

Europeans have long prized these hidden treasures, which go by the name "noyau" in France. The French love to leave cherries unpitted in preserves and desserts like clafouti, so the subtle almond flavor can permeate the fruit. In Italy, the kernels from apricots are used to flavor amaretti cookies. And distillers use the kernels in stone fruits when making several famous liqueurs, including kirsch and amaretto.

But these kernels can have a dark side. They contain a compound that can release cyanide in the body. This is true for other foods too, such as apple seeds and cassava (aka tapioca) root. Our bodies can detoxify small amounts without a problem. But when consumed in large amounts, well, anyone who's ever read a mystery novel knows cyanide can be deadly.

Now, this can be quite alarming, especially since the Amaretto Cherries recipe in last week's FOODday recommended including 1/4 cup of pits in the jar. The idea is to give the cherries a more pronounced almond flavor. But does that make them unsafe to eat? No, because no one is going to eat the pits, and there aren't that many of them in the first place.

But what about recipes that use ground-up kernels? Are they unsafe? Not if the kernels are roasted. When the kernels are roasted, the compound is destroyed but much of the flavor remains. Roasting the whole pits at 350 degrees for 10 minutes helps destroy the compound and make the shells brittle, so they're easier to crack. Then remove the kernels and roast them for a few minutes longer, to be sure they're completely safe.

Once the kernels are roasted, you can steep them in cream to make almond-scented ice cream. You can grind them, add a little sugar and sprinkle the mixture on your fruit pies, galettes, crisps and cobblers. Or use the ground kernels to flavor pastry cream, which is the base for so many wonderful, summery desserts such as tarts, trifles and parfais.

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