

The Magic of the Mortar and Pestle

Mortars and pestles are beautifully sculptured, but they're also useful. The material they're made from often dictates how they're used.

Nothing beats this hands-on tool for unlocking flavor

BY PENELOPE CASAS

I get great pleasure from the powers of alchemy that my mortar and pestle suggest. But it is for more practical, earthly purposes, such as mashing herbs and spices or making sauces like pesto, that I turn time and again to one of my many mortars and pestles.

The purpose of the mortar and pestle is not just to mince and mix, but to commingle ingredients by grinding them to a powder or pounding them to a paste. This way, flavors blend and meld as they can't do when merely cut with a knife. Texture, too, changes in a mortar and pestle. Pesto, named for the pestle, can be watery when made in a food processor, but it has a traditional, rustic consistency when made in a mortar.

When I use a mortar and pestle, I feel more closely connected with the task at hand. While it takes more effort than using a food processor, the rewards are many: inhaling an enticing fragrance as aromas are released, easily gauging the texture of what I'm mashing, and even enjoying the sound of the pestle hitting the mortar. It's also easy to clean.

Though I use a food processor and couldn't live without it for the things it does best, I prefer to use a mortar and pestle when ingredient quantities are small, because the mortar and pestle does a better job of bringing out flavors. Try this experiment. Cut a clove of garlic with a sharp knife into slices. Smash another clove in a mortar and pestle or on a cutting board if you don't have one yet. The smashed clove will smell much stronger than the sliced one because more of the garlic's cells are opened when crushed, so more aromas and flavors are released.

MANY KINDS, MANY USES

Although the word *mortar* refers to its use as a container in which mortar was mixed, the tool has a long history in cooking. Used in tandem with its club-shaped pestle, it was the first means of turning grain into flour. Mortars and pestles are found in almost every culture and are made from many materials, including cast iron, brass, clay, marble, and wood.

In Mexico, lava rock and earthenware mortars (*molcajetes* and *chirmoleras*) have long been used to grind spices and nuts and to crush tomatoes and

Photos: Susan Kahn

tomatillos. In Greece, *skordalia*, a wonderful creation of potato, garlic, olive oil, and often walnuts, is traditionally made in a wooden mortar. The Japanese version of the mortar, called a *suribachi*, is unglazed and ridged inside to help crush ingredients like sesame seeds and to grind shrimp into a paste.

I'm on a perpetual quest to reproduce the flavors of Spain in my kitchen, and I'd be lost without the mortar and pestle; it has long been the backbone of cooking in Spain, where mashed pastes—fragrant with garlic, parsley, saffron, spices, and nuts—are the secret to much of the cuisine's vibrant flavors.

Keep your mortar and pestle within reach for everyday tasks.

You'll find you can use it for more than making ethnic dishes. Use it to unlock the aromatic oils in dried herbs and spices. A mortar and pestle is especially effective when you need to grind a small quantity of a whole spice, which wouldn't reach the blade of a mini chopper, or to grind a few nuts. Use it to mix spice rubs, to mash anchovies to a paste for Caesar salad, or to make guacamole.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MORTAR AND PESTLE FOR YOU

I've assembled quite a collection of mortars and pestles, some for decoration and others exclusively for cooking. My brass mortars are mainly for adornment, but my Spanish ceramic mortars are put to use almost every day. I often reach for them to accomplish common tasks like mashing garlic and parsley.

The material the mortar and pestle are made of determines the jobs they're best for. A marble mortar and pestle makes short work of grinding hard ingredients, such as seeds and nuts. A mortar with a rough surface, such as lava rock or unglazed ceramic, makes mashing and grinding easier because the ingredients cling to the surface instead of slipping around.

When buying a mortar and pestle, choose one with a pestle that feels comfortable—that way, you'll want to use it often. A heavier pestle will lessen the effort needed to do the job. A good all-purpose mortar size for making seasoning mixtures is about 3½ inches across and 2½ inches deep, with a pestle that's 7 inches long and about 1½ inches wide at its base for good leverage and coverage. You may want a larger size mortar when using more ingredients, as in making pesto. Another mortar I use often is 5 inches across and 3 inches deep. If you're only buying one, choose a larger size: it will be more versatile.

No instruction manual necessary. There are just a few things to keep in mind when using a mortar



Mortars and pestles are found in many cuisines. A Japanese suribachi (foreground) has a ridged bottom for grinding spices. The oversized mortar doubles as a mixing bowl. The Mexican molcajete stands on short legs and has been used for centuries to grind spices and grains.



A variety of sizes comes in handy. The author uses a small mortar and pestle for grinding seasoning mixtures and larger ones for sauces.



Two motions for most mixtures. Pound the pestle up and down to pulverize hard ingredients such as spices and nuts (left). Push the pestle against the mortar in a circular motion to mash softer ingredients like herbs.

and pestle. Wrap one hand around the mortar to hold it in place and tightly wrap the fingers of the other hand around the pestle. If you're combining a few ingredients, begin with the hardest and pound these. Next add the softer ingredients, such as herbs and garlic. A pinch of salt draws out the moisture from the ingredients to help the mashing process. Finally, use the pestle to stir in any liquids, such as vinegar, oil, or broth.

Prices for mortars and pestles vary, but they're always a fraction of the price of a food processor.

Penelope Casas writes about Spanish food and travel. Her latest book, ¡Delicioso! The Regional Cooking of Spain, will be in bookstores this spring. ♦