

# Chicago Tribune

## Hold The Mayo —And Don't Let Go!

***All-American condiment plays a major role in summer salads, sandwiches—and celebrations***

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By Heather McPherson

In a nation that is waging war against childhood obesity, and where good and bad cholesterol numbers are bantered about at cocktail parties with the same excitement as celebrity gossip, one condiment defies today's health-conscious trend.

Mayonnaise: It's the glue of salads and celebrations.

Whether you prefer full-throttle mayo, fat-free, lower-fat, soy-based, organic, trans-fat-free or subtly flavored, supermarket shelves are stacked with mayonnaise choices, and consumers are snapping them up.

In 2005, Americans spent more than \$20 million on mayonnaise products, according to ACNielsen research. Mayonnaise's ability to bind and blend has made it an important ingredient in all classic cuisines, but in the kitchens of Southern cooks, it is especially critical to deviled eggs, casseroles, dips and potato salads. Mayo also is found in regional favorites such as cakes, biscuits and rolls.

It's especially an iconic Southern dressing.

"In the South, it's not a question of which came first, the chicken or the egg. It's which came first, the mayonnaise or the pimento cheese," said John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance at the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi in Oxford.

"It's not as if there was a Moses of mayonnaise who handed down the first jar," Edge said. "But it is such an important ingredient in all sorts of Southern salads, cakes and sauces that we tend to be fervently loyal to brands within the region. In New Orleans, it would be Blue Plate. The upper South prefers Duke's—my favorite. And then there are the Hellmann's purists, with other brands figuring in elsewhere."

If there was a Moses of Mayo, he most likely was addressed as *monsieur*. The creation of this sauce with a lemony edge often is traced to the celebration of a French military victory over the British at the port of Mahon in Spain, according to "The Oxford Companion to Food." This thick emulsion of egg yolks and vegetable oil became known as the "sauce from Mahon," or *sauce mahonnaise*.

Larousse Gastronomique, one of the culinary world's most familiar encyclopedic sources, contends that mayonnaise "is a popular corruption of *moyeunaise*, derived from

the very old French word *moyeu*, which means yolk of egg."

The debate over the origin seems to have as many turns as there are variations on the mayonnaise theme.

Homemade mayonnaise is easy to prepare, but the first attempt can strike fear in culinary students and novice home cooks. The process can be persnickety, but the basic recipe is one of the great examples of cooking as edible science, explained Shirley Corriher, author of "CookWise."

"To make mayonnaise, you start with an egg yolk or a whole egg and a little liquid—lemon juice, water or prepared mustard, which contains vinegar," Corriher said. "In the case of whole-egg mayonnaise, most of the liquid is in the egg white. The emulsifiers in the egg yolk dissolve in the liquid and drastically lower the surface tension.

"Then you turn on the blender or start whisking vigorously and adding the oil. The blender or whisk breaks the oil into tiny droplets. The emulsifier coats these droplets to prevent their running together, and the water, with a very low surface tension, is free to flow between the droplets. Now you are on your way to a good mayonnaise."

Respect the science, and you get a respectable dollop of mayo. Patience and a steady hand are key to the process. The sauce can "break" into a curdled-looking mess if the cook adds the oil too quickly.

Purists swear by hand-whisking, but a reliable blender or food processor works fine, provided you take care to add the oil slowly.

The words "dressing" or "spread" on a jar of something that resembles mayonnaise indicate an element of sweetness that can send some into a tizzy.

"I personally don't hold very much respect for the likes of Miracle Whip," said John Egerton, an award-winning author who lives in Tennessee. "That's just not kosher. That's like putting sugar in corn bread. Something is not quite right there."

Egerton isn't a homemade-mayo purist but admits that the best mayo he ever tasted was homemade.

"For me, home-grown tomato season is just around the corner, and there is nothing better than tomato slices sprinkled with kosher salt and dressed with good mayonnaise," said Egerton. "Plop that between two slices of gummy white bread, and I'm a happy man."

Edge, of the Southern Foodways Alliance, understands that passion for something so simple.

"Our affection for mayonnaise is about continuity and connection," he said. "The mere mention of the condiment conjures up the iconic dishes of our culture. Pimento-cheese spreads, deviled eggs and the like remind us of church suppers and potlucks on the porch.

"The mayonnaise doesn't hold any magic. But the food, and where and when we ate it, does."