

I recently had the gift of helping some dear friends plan their menu for a large party, which featured several favorites from this column, including the Grilled Chicken Souvlaki I wrote about last June. The menu also featured hearty proteins like prime rib sliders and carnitas-seasoned pulled pork, so instead of serving the marinated chicken skewers with a traditional cucumber and yogurt tzatziki sauce, I chose to make this robust and tangy Roasted Red Pepper Pesto. This dipping sauce was easy to make and versatile enough to complement any of the proteins on the menu. It was also such a hit that my friend even packed some to take with her on her flight back home.

Pesto is a rustic, Italian sauce traditionally made with a heaping amount of fresh basil, garlic, pine nuts, parmesan cheese and olive oil, but you can alter these ingredients in myriad ways to create a variety of flavor combinations. For this occasion, instead of basil I chose the smoky sweetness of roasted red peppers to balance the lemony garlic marinade on the chicken and I swapped out the pine nuts for walnuts, which have a mellower flavor profile and price point. To save time, I used a jar variety from my supermarket, which was easier and more affordable than roasting the peppers myself.

In addition to these replacements, I also added some dried oregano to balance the oregano in the chicken marinade, as well as Worcestershire sauce, Tabasco sauce and crushed red pepper flakes for a touch of umami heat. With these adjustments, I found that the pesto needed a little help to pull all the flavors together, and a splash of red wine vinegar or lemon juice worked perfectly.

Using a food processor is ideal for this recipe, as it will save you time in chopping and blending. Quick and easy, this recipe shouldn't take more than 10 minutes to make from start to finish. Once you have assembled all the ingredients, place everything except the olive oil in the processor and let it run for about two minutes until it is good and smooth.

Next, with the processor running, pour the olive oil through the feed tube in a slow and steady stream. Adding the olive oil separately like this will help it emulsify fully and thicken the pesto. In uncooked dishes like this one, the ingredients really need to shine, and I recommend using the best quality extra virgin olive oil you can find (my personal favorite is the locally famous Mistra Estates Greek Olive Oil).

This pesto was great as a dipping sauce for smoky, grilled chicken and it also works well as a condiment for burgers and sandwiches, as well as a topping or spread on crostini and crackers. Simple, quick and delicious is always a winning combination.

Roasted Red Pepper Pesto

Makes: 2 cups

Ingredients:

- 1 (12-ounce) jar roasted red peppers
- ½ cup walnuts halves
- ¼ cup grated parmesan cheese
- 3 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar or lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- ¼ teaspoon Tabasco
- ¼ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
¼ cup extra virgin olive oil

Directions:

In a food processor, add all the ingredients, except the olive oil. Blend until smooth, about 1 ½ to 2 minutes. With the processor running, add the olive oil in a slow, steady stream and blend for 1 minute. Taste and adjust seasoning and flavors as desired.

The pesto may be served immediately and is even better after 24 hours as the flavors will meld together over time.

Store the pesto in the refrigerator for up to one week or in the freezer for up to 3 months. Serve as a dipping sauce with grilled chicken or kabobs, as a dip or topping with crostini and crackers, or as a condiment for burgers and sandwiches.