

# Our Ultimate Guide to Canned Tuna, a Pantry Essential You Shouldn't Overlook

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Canned tuna is one of those ingredients that is easy to overlook, but you'll be glad once you've made it a pantry staple. Versatile and packed full of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids, canned tuna can be a snack with chips on its own or the star ingredient in salad Niçoise or a simple pasta. If you haven't bought or cooked with canned tuna in a while, you'll likely be surprised by how many types are now available (and how *good* many of them are).

"There is a new generation of non-commodity, well-fished, more sustainable tuna. Wild Planet is a good example, and I think that's the future of both the industry and consumer preference," says Mark Bittman, chef, author, editor-in-chief of The Bittman Project and host of the podcast Food with Mark Bittman.

All to say, it's time to give canned tuna another chance. Here's everything you need to know about shopping for canned tuna, including how long canned tuna lasts, and whether mercury is an issue. Also, discover why some canned tunas cost more than others.

[From Whole to Crushed to Diced, Our Guide to Canned Tomatoes](#)



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## Types of Canned Tuna

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There are a few species of tuna you'll find canned; the most common are albacore and skipjack. Each has a slightly different flavor and texture.

- **Albacore:** With an overall light and mild flavor and a natural salinity, albacore is popular for its versatility. If you don't want a fishy taste, this is the tuna type for you. "I love albacore tuna in organic olive oil," says chef and co-founder of the tinned fish company Scout Charlotte Langley. "The overall flavor is mild, but the natural salinity of the fish comes through, lightly complemented by the clean, bright taste of the olive oil."
- **Skipjack:** The soft texture of skipjack tuna means you'll often find it in canned chunks, called chunk light. Skipjack has a strong, fishy, and usually salty flavor, and is ideal for those that love seafood.
- **Bigeye:** With a firm texture and a rich, sweet flavor, bigeye tuna is less fishy than skipjack, but not as mild as albacore.
- **Tongol:** This is a delicate, mild tuna that is less fishy than skipjack and tends to contain lower mercury levels than albacore.
- **Yellowfin:** Pale pink in color, yellowfin tuna has a mild, sweet, and meaty flavor.
- **Ventresca:** This is the marbled belly of a type of albacore tuna. It tends to be the softest and sweetest part of the fish.

## White vs. Light vs. Chunk Light Tuna

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Wander the tinned fish supermarket aisle, and you'll likely spot cans labeled white, light, or chunk light tuna.

- **White:** This refers to albacore tuna.
- **Light:** This label can include a variety of tuna species; it's often skipjack, but may also be a mix of skipjack, yellowfin, bigeye, or tongol.
- **Chunk light:** This simply indicates light tuna in smaller pieces, instead of a packed filet.

## Oil-Packed vs. Water-Packed Tuna

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Is oil-packed or water-packed tuna better? You'll see both in aisles. There's no right answer, although one way to decide which to buy is to think about how you will use it. "Oil packed is great if it's extra-virgin olive oil and the source is trusted," says Bittman. "Water packed is fine, too; obviously it has less flavor, but you can always add oil."

### When to Choose Water-Packed

Suppose you're looking to incorporate tuna into a recipe that calls for its own seasoning. In that case, water-packed allows the flavor of the tuna to shine through, and you can control the spices and seasoning and adjust accordingly. "I find the tuna packed in water is best for eventually mixing it with some kind of fat and other flavors," says [Jessica Lawrenz](#), a cheesemonger who frequently pairs tinned fish with cheese.

### When to Choose Oil-Packed

If, however, you're making a dish that calls for olive oil—or you're snacking on tuna—you might want to reach for canned tuna packed in the fat. "As a longtime seafood chef, I prefer my tuna packed in olive oil for richness, mouthfeel, and moisture," Langley says. I prefer to use the whole contents of the can, oil included, so recipes that are flexible with oil, like a salad with a nice dressing or something that deserves a drizzle, is where I prefer to use tuna packed in oil."

## How to Identify Quality Canned Tuna

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Beyond identifying the type of tuna you want and choosing between oil- or water-packed varieties, it's also important to read the ingredient lists and labels; stick to clear, clean labels with simple, high-quality ingredients you recognize to determine "real quality differences," says Bittman, adding that quality essentially means sustainability.

## Certifications

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Some canned tuna is sourced and produced overseas, where slave and child labor are rampant in the seafood industry. "Check for responsible sourcing," Langley says. "A MSC certification (a blue fish on the front of packaging) is a great indicator that a fishery meets international best practices for sustainable fishing." Her brand Scout's albacore tuna in olive oil comes from a fishery in the Pacific Northwest, where it's harvested one by one using hooks on a long line that only goes below a few meters to ensure almost zero bycatch of non-target species.

## Look for How the Tuna Was Caught

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The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch suggests only buying canned tuna that lists how tuna was caught, including pole-and-line-caught, pole-caught, troll-caught, FAD-free, free school, and school-caught.

## Shop at Vetted Markets

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A tip from Seafood Watch is to buy canned tuna from stores including Whole Foods Markets, MOM's Organic Market, Aldi, Albertsons, and other chains that partner with Fish Wise, a non-profit that helps seafood businesses become more environmentally responsible.

## Cans, Jars, and Pouches

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Canned tuna doesn't simply come in, well, cans: It's also sold in glass jars or pouches. Generally, you'll find jarred tuna in all the same varieties as canned, although jarred tuna tends to be moister than many tins and comes in bigger pieces. When tuna is vacuum-sealed in a pouch, it doesn't contain any added water, so you may find it tastes fresher.

## How Long Each Lasts

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Keep in mind, however, that while canned or jarred tuna is shelf-stable for three to five years on average, pouched tuna is normally only shelf-stable for three years—and unlike cans or jars, the packaging is not recyclable.

## Why Some Canned Tuna Is More Expensive

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Generally, albacore or white canned tuna costs more than light or chunk light tuna. That's due to several factors, including consumer demand; white tuna is also *all* albacore, while light can contain a combination of tuna species. Whether the tuna is one solid piece of filet or various pieces can also impact cost.

Tuna in glass jars also tends to be pricier due to the cost of glass—both to make and distribute.

## Is Mercury an Issue?

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Any canned tuna you consume will likely contain some mercury, but while the neurotoxin is something to consider, it shouldn't be a concern for most people. However, if you are pregnant or trying to conceive, you should speak with your doctor about consuming canned fish, as mercury can affect the health of developing fetuses. Parents of young children may also want to talk with their child's physician, since consuming mercury above certain levels can affect neurodevelopment.

"There is a range of other tinned fish options to support a diverse diet. Species such as sardines, salmon, oysters, and even types of tuna [including skipjack] are typically low in mercury," says Langley.

## How to Use Canned Tuna

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The beauty of canned tuna is its versatility—and high-quality tuna will shine without you having to add much to it. You'll find yourself reaching for a can of tuna when you need a quick yet satisfying lunch like Martha's favorite tuna salad, a protein-packed afterschool snack, or even a dinner-party appetizer.

"Try lightly tossing tuna with capers and thinly-sliced preserved lemons, pairing with hard, nutty aged cheese like a real California milk carmody or dry Jack reserve, along with a dry, floral, minerally white wine," says Lawrenz. "Or try tuna on rustic crackers with hard cheese and pickled shallots."