

OUTSIDE THE LABS

Best Butters for Everyday Use

We tasted nearly a dozen different butters you'll find in the supermarket

By Perry Santanachote

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Skip going to a restaurant for fancy butters—ones you can buy to store in your fridge are just as good.

Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

Some dining patrons might invite the sommelier to discuss the restaurant's wine options. On the other hand, I tune out all that vino talk and request that the server, "Tell me about your butter." If they don't skip a beat, I know I'm in my kind of place.

Needless to say, I care about butter. And there's never been a better time to be a butter fan—grocery stores now stock their butter sections with dozens of options, from big national brands to small local farms. We no longer need to get our fancy butter fixes at restaurants when the good stuff can be had at home.

Salted or unsalted is also no longer the only choice. Other varieties include grass-fed (made from cows that ate a majority-grass diet), cultured (fermented with live bacterial cultures, like yogurt), smoked, and European style, the unsalted version of which has at least 82 percent butterfat (American style has 80 percent). But with so many to choose from, how do you know which to grab and when? Butter isn't cheap, either. The [Federal Reserve Economic Data reports](#) that the average cost of a stick of butter is \$4.52 per pound.

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To find out which butters are worthy, I rounded up a handful of trusty taste testers: Paul Hope, a CR writer and trained chef; Trisha

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Calvo, CR's food editor; Mary Farrell, a CR writer and avid home cook; and Theresa Hope, a CR video producer and avid baker. Plus, yours truly, a writer and recipe developer.

And what's a butter panel without some expert butter makers? To

help inform the evaluation, I called up researcher Gina Mode and technologist Mellisa Houfe at the University of Wisconsin's Center for Dairy Research. Both are licensed butter graders and butter makers. And for baking expertise, I leaned on Kathryn Gordon, chief pastry and baking arts instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York.

Best Butters at a Glance

Editor's Choice



Finlandia Unsalted

This creamy, rich butter—both the unsalted and salted versions—is premium in every way, from aroma to flavor. We every store.

Prices from:

\$4.99



Editor's Choice: Finlandia Unsalted

Price at the time of publish, for 8 ounces: \$4.99



Finlandia butter has a natural, well-rounded, clean flavor.
Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

Most of the evaluators came to the butter tasting thinking that Kerrygold was king and left with a new favorite: Finlandia. “This one is a keeper,” says Mary. “I could eat it again and again.”

This butter from Finland has a glossy sheen and, as Theresa puts it, “spreads satisfyingly.” It's silky but

doesn't melt too fast. "Hangs around long enough for you to appreciate it," says Trisha. It's dense and velvety, like a chocolate truffle.

The unsalted butter has a natural, well-rounded, clean flavor with no aftertaste. "This one is for a butter lover, for sure," says Paul. It comes wrapped in a thick foil wrapper, which protects the butter against off-odors. Its aroma is light and pleasant, almost floral. I joked that I would wear this as a perfume, but I'm becoming more serious about that sentiment as I eat through this brick of butter.

Isigny Ste Mère Unsalted

Price at the time of publish, for 8.8 ounces: \$6.29



Isigny Ste Mère unsalted butter is glossy and flavorful, but also grassy and a bit sour.
Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

If you can't get your hands on Finlandia, the unsalted Isigny Ste Mère is similarly priced and excellent. This French butter tastes grassier, sourer, and has a stronger scent. The texture is glossy and smooth, but some consider it too spreadable, almost like a margarine's level of slickness. If you opt for Isigny Ste Mère, skip the salted version, which is way too salty, mottled with yellow spots, craggy in texture, and tastes stale.

Budget Pick: Breakstone's Unsalted

Price at the time of publish, for 8 ounces: \$3.99



Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

Breakstone's butter isn't going to blow your mind, but it's not going to break your budget either. It's a solid workhorse for everyday use, but it's not the best for baking, so get the Land O'Lakes for your holiday baking marathon.

Some of the cheaper butters smell aggressively buttery, like movie theater popcorn (a sign that this scent was an added ingredient). Breakstone's buttery aroma is just

right and doesn't smell fake. The unsalted Breakstone's butter has a smooth texture with "enough body that it doesn't sink into the bread but nicely coats it," says Trisha. In the mouth, it's a little gummy and greasy but has a good cream flavor (more cream than butter) with distinct sour notes. Paul says, "It has a dairylike complexity that is really nice."

The salted version had a slight cardboard smell but tasted better than others at this price. Many other samples tasted old, smelled like the refrigerator, and were sharply salted.

Best for Baking: Land O'Lakes Unsalted

Price at the time of publish, for 8 ounces: \$4.29



Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

The pound cake made with Land O'Lakes unsalted butter has a semi-even color with a very moist melt-in-your-mouth crumb and buttery aroma. The tablespoon markings on the butter wrappers are easy to read and properly aligned along the length of the butter (something that is all too uncommon).

The butter is not too soft and it's easy to cut, an important factor when preparing pie dough or biscuits, says Kathryn Gordon, the chief pastry and baking arts instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York. "Generally, European-style butters are easier to work with due to the higher butterfat content." Land O'Lakes also makes an "extra creamy" European-style unsalted butter that might be even better for baking, though we didn't test it out. (Higher-fat butters might also be better suited for flaky pastries and cookies, but we baked only pound cakes in this evaluation.)

We wouldn't recommend the Land O'Lakes as a table butter. On its own, it's kind of gummy, greasy, and difficult to spread. And it has an in-your-face buttery aroma—like movie theater popcorn—but it doesn't taste buttery. It's all bark and no bite. This probably contributes to the buttery scent of the pound cake, but it was too much without the flour, sugar, vanilla, and eggs to offset it. The butter has a clean, mild, and flat flavor that might be ideal for baking but less so for spreading on your bread.

Best Salted: Kerrygold Salted

Price at the time of publish, for 8 ounces: \$5.99



Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

Finlandia actually makes our favorite salted butter, too, but Kerrygold comes close, and is much easier for most people to find. (Although the unsalted version didn't fare as well.) The deep-yellow Irish butter has a nice buttery aroma that smells natural. The saltiness is well rounded but could use more sweetness, and the texture is very spreadable, but it can become too soft when left out at room temperature for hours.

There are noticeable off-flavors, which some tasters chalk up to grassiness—Kerrygold says the butter comes from the milk of grass-fed cows, after all—but some found it off-putting. Trisha says, “The flavor has a distinct sourness that is strongest on the finish, but it isn't pleasant.” The off-flavors especially come through in the unsalted version because salt helps to mask them.

Best Cultured: Vermont Creamy Unsalted

Price at the time of publish, for 8 ounces: \$4.99



Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

Of all the cultured butters we tasted, the Vermont Creamery sample was the only one noticeably cultured in its aroma and flavor. The butter is made from fermented cream that has been treated overnight with bacterial culture.

Its texture is full, almost fluffy, and very spreadable. It tastes complex and different from all the others, with some sour and bitter flavors. However, it smells and tastes more cultured than buttery. Still, it's a nice and unexpected butter to set out on the table. “It's sure to be a crowd-pleaser,” says Paul. And if you're a salted butter fan, we found the salted version to be slightly and pleasantly salted—you'll notice saltier spots, so it's not evenly distributed, but I liked that about it.

Other Butters We Evaluated

Cabot: The pound cake baked with Cabot was the most beautiful and evenly browned but was dry. Our butter sample was darker on the outside than on the inside, which is a sign of oxidation. And while the flavor was creamy with a little tang, it was barely buttery.

Horizon: The unsalted butter was slightly darker on the outside and had off-odors and off-flavors. It's resistant and broke my plastic spoon when I tried to spread it, and its buttery scent was strong, but the flavor was flat with a bit of an aftertaste. The pound cake made with it turned out very middling in terms of appearance, texture, and flavor. The salted version tasted old and stale.

Lurpak: We found only the "slightly salted" Lurpak, which was a tad sharp, but the aroma was pleasant. There's not much sweet butter flavor, though; it's primarily creamy salt, says Trisha.

Organic Valley: This gummy sample also broke my spoon when I tried to spread it, and it took a while to melt in my mouth. Its aroma is faint and lovely, but its flavor is flat with an acidic aftertaste. "It doesn't taste like anything, so why eat it?" says Trisha. Its salted version is sharply salty and uneven.

Plugrá: The buttery aroma is sharp and smells fake, while the flavor is flat with more of an aftertaste than anything. Several tasters also noticed sour, bitter, and peppery off-flavors and commented that the butter tasted more like solid oil than butter. The pound cake made with Plugrá was tender but blotchy and not buttery. The salted version had off-odors, pronounced sharpness, and was hard to cut, like cheddar cheese.



Butter can come in a range of colors and textures, as these four butters we evaluated illustrate.

Photo: Perry Santanachote/Consumer Reports

How We Evaluated the Butters

I purchased 11 widely distributed butters available at several grocery stores in New York City in October 2022, opting out of store-brand butters that are available only at certain stores, such as [365 by Whole Foods Market](#) and [Trader Joe's](#). I would have loved to try popular regional brands, such as Straus, Challenge, and Tillamook, but I was unable to get my hands on any in the Northeast. Therefore, this list is by no means definitive.

Also, a disclaimer: Even the best butter cannot endure poor or prolonged supermarket storage without losing quality, say Mode and Houfe. I can't assume that I found

these butters in their ideal condition. The flavors of many small-batch and artisanal butters change seasonally, too, due to the weather and available feed for the cows.

My selection was a mix of big nationally distributed brands—Breakstone’s, Cabot, Horizon, Kerrygold, Land O’Lakes, and Organic Valley—and smaller, regional, or imported brands—Finlandia, Isigny Ste Mère, Lurpak, Plugrá, and Vermont Creamery.

We blind-tasted the unsalted and salted versions of the butters on pieces of baguette and plain at a cool room temperature of 55° F, analyzing each sample for color, aroma, texture, mouthfeel, and flavor.

Color: The color can vary from creamy white to rich gold, depending on the cows’ breed and time of year. “The depth of the color isn’t an indication of quality per se,” says Mode. It’s more important to observe uniformity. Dehydration or oxidation can occur when butter ages, or the wrapping material is low quality, resulting in a darker or lighter surface than the interior.

Aroma: Ideally, butter should have a milky fresh scent with a hint of diacetyl—the main aroma compound for “butteriness.” Cultured butters may also have a whiff of acidity, similar to crème fraîche. Off-odors, such as onion and garlic, can transfer to the butter if it’s been poorly stored or poorly packaged.

Texture: You should be able to slice the butter easily and evenly. We noted the butter’s spreadability and whether there was excess moisture, greasiness, or crumbling.

Mouthfeel: Butter should be somewhat waxy and cohesive, whereas weak butter will be slippery and melt too quickly. Butter should dissolve relatively slowly so that you can fully taste all the flavorful compounds in butter that are released as it melts. Gummy butter does not melt readily but sticks to the roof of the mouth.

Flavor: “You want the butter to have fresh, sweet, creamy butter notes,” says Houfe. “And then, to have a clean finish without an aftertaste.” Some unsalted butters have added “natural flavoring” on their ingredients list, which is a cocktail of lactic acid and diacetyl that acts as a preservative instead of salt, says Houfe. Diacetyl naturally occurs in butter as it ripens and ferments, but some manufacturers of unsalted butter add extra diacetyl along with lactic acid to boost flavor and extend the shelf life.

Salt: “All the flavors should be in balance with one another,” says Houfe. “The salt shouldn’t be overpowering. You want to make sure you taste the butter.”

What’s surprising about the butters we evaluated is how many of them had lost their buttery flavor and tasted more like the inside of a refrigerator. It underscores the importance of buying the freshest butter you can find. (Unsalted butter has a shelf life of up to six months; salted butter has up to 12.) That means shopping at stores with a fast turnover or, better yet, buying your

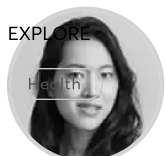
butter from local farms. Storage is also important. Mode and Houfe say to keep butter wrapped up or covered in an airtight container away from heat, air, light, and odorous foods. “Butter is like a sponge and will absorb those other flavors,” says Houfe. Use the freezer for long-term storage.

I also baked pound cakes with six unsalted butters to see which produced the most buttery, moist cake. I didn’t bake with the premium or cultured butters, because Gordon says much of their nuances that demand a higher price get lost in the baking process, making them not worth buying for this particular use. And it’s generally a no-no to bake with salted butters because you can’t control the amount of salt in your

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Perry Santanachote

As a multimedia content creator at Consumer Reports, Perry Santanachote covered a range of trends—from parasite cleanses to pickleball paddles. Perry was also a main producer of our Outside the Labs content, evaluating products in her tiny Manhattan apartment.

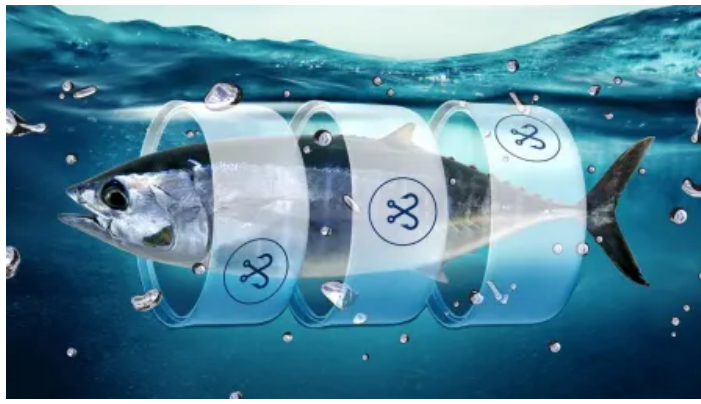
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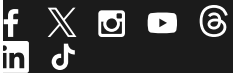
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