

## Sally Schneider's Sage-and-Garlic Popcorn, + 5 Popcorn Improvisations

Brown Butter Popcorn  
Caramelized Shallot Popcorn  
Rosemary Popcorn  
Smoky Bacon Popcorn  
White Truffle Popcorn

My improvisations with popcorn arose out of an attempt to pan-fry white beans in sage-and-garlic-flavored oil. The beans came out crispy with a flavor that reminded me of popcorn. I considered calling them "popcorn beans", then thought: "Why not actually try the oil on popcorn, instead of the usual melted butter?" So I made a quick garlic-and-sage-flavored olive oil to drizzle over hot popcorn and used the crispy sage as a garnish.

It proved to be an addictive, grown-up popcorn to serve with cocktails or wine, while watching TV, or anytime you want a crunchy snack. I've been known to take it to the movies. It was just the beginning of a continuing exploration into popcorn possibilities.

I like to use an inexpensive hot air popper that pops corn kernels in minutes without oil. If you pop your corn in a microwave, use plain kernels; steer clear of those with "butter-flavor" or other additives. If you don't want to pop your own popcorn, use unflavored store-bought popcorn.

### *Understanding*

The classic flavoring for popcorn is melted butter, a liquid fat. Using other flavorful fats is an unlimited strategy for improvising. Simmering garlic and sage in olive oil is an example of the kinds of flavored oils that could be made to dress popcorn, using thinly sliced shallots, leeks or ramps; herbs such as rosemary, thyme, savory, sage, singly or in combination; spices such as ground or cracked coriander, fennel seed, or curry or ground chile powders. The by-products of many of these flavored fats are delicious crispy bits, such as shallots, sage leaves or garlic chips, which make a nice counterpoint to the popcorn. Rendered bacon fat yields its smoky fat and crisp pieces of bacon. For a buttery flavored oil, mix extra-virgin olive oil with unsalted butter; butter alone would burn from the prolonged heat. Here's the basic formula for dressing popcorn: 1/2 cup kernels yields about 12 cups popcorn, which needs about 1/4 cup fat to flavor it.

Grated sharp cheeses make a satisfying, deeply flavored and additive-free cheese corn. Toss hot buttered-or-olive oil-dressed popcorn liberally with grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, Pecorino Romano or Aged Gouda.

Exotically flavored popcorns make terrific gifts. Bear in mind, if you want to make popcorn well in advance of eating it, that butter-dressed popcorn doesn't stay as crisp as popcorn dressed with oil.

Makes 12 cups, 4 to 6 servings

For the popcorn

1/2 cup white or yellow popping corn kernels  
2 tablespoons peanut or canola oil (if necessary)  
3 tablespoons unsalted butter  
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
8 to 10 medium garlic cloves, thinly sliced (about 1/4 cup)  
1/2 cup loosely packed sage leaves (about 40)

**Pop the popcorn.** Pop the kernels in a hot air popper or a microwave according to manufacturer's instructions. To pop on the stovetop, pour peanut or canola oil in a large saucepan (at least 4 quarts). Heat over medium heat until hot but not smoking. Add a few kernels and cover. When they pop, the oil is hot enough. Add popping corn kernels and cover. Shake the pot back and forth on the burner, holding the lid down if necessary. Cook, shaking, until the popping stops, 3 or 4 minutes. Pour the popcorn into a large bowl.

**Make a flavorful fat.** In a large nonstick skillet, combine the butter, olive oil and garlic. Cover and cook over low heat, stirring frequently, until the garlic is barely golden, about 5 minutes. Uncover and cook until the garlic is crisp and golden, about 1 minute; do not allow to brown. With a slotted spoon, transfer the garlic to a plate lined with paper toweling. Add the sage leaves to the skillet and cook, turning once, until the leaves are darkened, fragrant, and crisp, 2 to 3 minutes. Drain the leaves on paper towels. Remove the oil from the heat until you are ready to dress the popcorn.

**Toss the popcorn with fat.** Drizzle the sage oil over 12 cups popcorn, tossing it to distribute it evenly. Then sprinkle the popcorn liberally with sea salt and toss again. Scatter the crispy sage leaves over the popcorn and serve at once.

## *Popcorn Improvisations*

### ***Brown Butter Popcorn***

Brown butter is butter toasted in a pan until it smells like roasting nuts. It takes classic buttered popcorn a big step further with no extra effort, deepening the flavor with roasty caramel overtones.

Melt *1/3 cup unsalted butter* in a small saucepan over moderately-low heat until the clear butter is amber colored and smells like roasted nuts.

Place *12 cups popcorn* in a large bowl. Drizzle the brown butter over, tossing it to distribute it evenly. Then sprinkle the popcorn liberally with sea salt and toss again.

### ***Caramelized Shallot Popcorn***

If you thinly slice shallots crosswise and fry them in peanut oil, you get something like tiny onion rings, along with a shallot-flavored oil. They are a perfect match for popcorn.

In a large (10-inch) heavy skillet, over medium-high heat, combine *1/4 cup peanut oil* and *5 to 6 medium shallots, thinly sliced crosswise (3/4 cup)*. Simmer until the shallots are golden and crispy, 8 to 10 minutes. Scoop the shallots out of the oil with a slotted spoon, drain, and transfer to a plate; sprinkle with salt.

Place *12 cups popcorn* in a large bowl. Drizzle the shallot oil over, tossing it to distribute it evenly. Then sprinkle the popcorn liberally with sea salt and toss again. Scatter the crispy shallots over the top.

### ***Rosemary Popcorn***

Rosemary makes an appealingly fragrant popcorn.

In a large nonstick skillet, combine the *1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil* and *2 medium garlic cloves, thinly sliced* and *2 tablespoons minced fresh rosemary*. Cover and cook over low heat, stirring frequently, until the garlic is barely golden, about 5 minutes. Uncover and cook until the garlic is crisp and golden, about 1 minute.

Place *12 cups popcorn* in a large bowl. Drizzle the rosemary oil over, tossing it to distribute it evenly. Then sprinkle the popcorn liberally with sea salt and toss again.

### ***Smoky Bacon Popcorn***

This is a completely over-the-top popcorn that makes perfect sense when you think of the affinity of bacon and corn. Since bacons vary wildly, it's difficult to calculate exactly how much fat it will yield when cooked. If you have more fat than you need, store it in a little jar in the fridge to use in the future.

Slice *about 6 ounces apple-smoked bacon* crosswise 1/4-inch thick and place in a medium heavy skillet. Cook, covered, over medium low heat until the bacon is crisp, about 7 minutes. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the bacon to a plate; measure 1/4 cup liquid bacon fat.

Place *12 cups popcorn (from 1/2 cup kernels)* in a large bowl. Drizzle the bacon fat over popcorn, tossing it to distribute it evenly. Then sprinkle the popcorn liberally with sea salt and toss again. Scatter the crisp bacon over the popcorn.

### ***White Truffle Popcorn***

It's worth investing in a small bottle of white truffle oil just to make this popcorn. Two teaspoons will flavor 12 cups of popcorn so it's an inexpensive way to get a heady dose of truffle. Since there are many ersatz truffle oils, look for the words "extra-virgin olive oil flavored with white truffle (*tuber magnatum pico*)" on the bottle.

Over low heat, melt *1/4 cup unsalted butter or extra-virgin olive oil* in a small saucepan. Stir in *2 to 2 1/2 teaspoons white truffle oil* or to taste. Place *12 cups popcorn (from 1/2 cup kernels)* in a large bowl. Drizzle the truffle butter over the popcorn, tossing well to coat. Season liberally with *sea salt*.

Excerpted from [The Improvisational Cook](#) by Sally Schneider