

Here are some of the health benefits of lard: The saturated fat in lard contains about one third of stearic acid, which may have a beneficial effect on cholesterol, and it helps to relax blood vessels. Lard, which is 40 percent unsaturated, belongs in the high oleic group, which has a similar lipid profile to olive oil (meaning it has lots of beneficial monounsaturated fatty acids). Also, lard has antimicrobial properties, so things fried in lard don't spoil as quickly. That's one of the reasons it is still used to fry some commercial brands of potato chips. Lard is a good choice for frying because it doesn't break down as easily as vegetable oil, causing the production of nasty trans-fats.

Health issues aside, I think you will be sold on lard the first time you make a piecrust with it. Oh, okay, some all-butter pie crusts are good, but they don't cut a cuff to piecrusts made with lard. A piecrust made with lard is a wonder—delicious and delicate in flavor, but flaky, and a bit crisper, meaning that the bottom browns better and is less prone to getting soggy than a crust made with just butter. I do love the taste of butter, so I like to add some to my lard dough, but you can make an all-lard piecrust, which would still taste terrific. All-lard crusts work particularly well with savory pies such as the Tourtière (page 236). To make an all-lard crust, simply replace the butter in the recipe with lard, but you may need to add a tablespoon or so of water because lard contains less water than butter.

If you're a baker and you've never used lard, I think you'll be surprised at how light your biscuits will be—not to mention how well lard works in cornbread, gingerbread, cookies (lard is what makes Chinese almond cookies so tasty), and steamed pudding.

Lard is also great for frying. The next time you make fried chicken, fried fish, or any coated pan-fried or deep-fried foods, use lard instead of vegetable oil or (God forbid!) vegetable shortening. Food fried in lard absorbs much less frying fat than food fried in vegetable oil and that's because saturated fats are not absorbed into fried food as easily as vegetable oils are, assuming the food is fried at the proper temperature, about 350° to 365° F. Another reason to use lard for frying is that it does not chemically break down at 365° F, yet it produces wonderfully crisp food.

Potatoes cooked in lard are plain irresistible, no matter whether they are deep fried, oven-roasted, or pan-fried. Shredded potatoes pressed into cakes and fried in lard with a tad of butter for flavor make the best and crispiest hash browns you've ever tasted.