

Taste Test: Salsa

Our editors tasted 20 brands of salsa and found one clear winner, as well as three good party-pleasing options by Carolina Santos-Neves

salsa—the condiment, not the music or dance style—spices up any party, tortilla chip, omelet, or taco. It's the multipurpose sauce that keeps us dipping for more.

Store-bought salsa should be chunky enough that it dresses up a tortilla chip but does not run down the sides. It should be multidimensional, with the sweet flavor of summer tomatoes, some element of onions, and a subtle kick of hot chile peppers to top it off.

Three essential issues confronted us before we could start dipping our chips: What style, flavor, and brands should we taste? We decided to let our readers weigh in. So we posted a [poll](#) on the Epi-Log blog and asked our readers to choose their favorite style of salsa: mild, medium, or hot. Out of the 600 people who voted, 48 percent of salsa fans said they prefer medium—a clear majority.

The next step involved narrowing down what flavor to taste. These days store-bought salsa can have corn kernels, black beans, or fruit. It can be fire-roasted or made with tomatillos. We chose to narrow the field to the most basic tomato-based salsa that each brand had to offer.

Lastly, we obtained a list of the ten top-selling salsas in the United States and made sure to include those.

The 20 medium varieties of salsa we tasted are available nationwide and include the following, listed from highest to lowest score in our tests: Green Mountain Gringo, Tostitos Chunky, Deerfield Farms, Frontera Chunky Tomato, Bravos Thick & Chunky, Emeril's Original Recipe, Pace Thick & Chunky, Chi-Chi's Thick & Chunky*, Newman's Own All Natural Chunky*, Organicville, Muir Glen Organic, Ortega Original, Taco Bell Thick 'n Chunky**, Old El Paso Thick 'n Chunky**, Spike's All Natural Santa Fe Packing Co. Picante Sauce, Herr's Chunky, Valu Time, La Victoria Thick 'n Chunky, Amy's, and Herdez Casera.

(The brands marked with * received the same score. The same is true for those marked with **.)

Methodology: In a blind taste test, judges compared the flavor, consistency, and appearance of basic tomato-based medium salsas. All salsas were served at room temperature and paired with tortilla chips. We ranked them according to the Epicurious four-fork rating system (four being the best).



editors' rating:
4 forks

Best Overall

Epi Top Pick: *Green Mountain Gringo Salsa* (\$5.59 for 16 oz. jar)

Pros: Prominent chunks of bright-red tomatoes and green peppers featured in this salsa, but also visible garlic bits and veggie seeds, which made it look and taste homemade. "Very distinctive cilantro and peppery flavors, with a real kick of heat," mentioned one taster.

Cons: Though it's marketed as "medium" this salsa was a bit too *caliente* for some. Most expensive product of the four winners.



editors' rating:
3½ forks

First Runner-Up: *Tostitos Chunk Salsa* (\$2.99 for 15.5 oz. jar)

Pros: This salsa demonstrated a classic tomato salsa taste with no overpowering herb flavors. "The sweet heat sneaks up on you and lingers on your tongue—it's invigorating," said one tester. The tomato-red dip also had the ideal ratio of green pepper and onion chunks, making it "perfectly scoopable."

Cons: You'd better like salt.



editors' rating:
3 forks

Second Runner-Up: *Deerfield Farms Salsa* (\$2.99 for 16 oz. jar)

Pros: The large onion and green pepper chunks made this variety look "appetizing" and "natural" to several tasters. The veggies also give it a nice crunchy consistency and sweet medium-hot kick. Best bargain of the winners.

Cons: Potentially overwhelming taste of peppers and onions.



editors' rating:
2½ forks

Third Runner-Up: *Frontera Chunky Tomato Salsa* (\$5.39 for 16 oz. jar)

Pros: This maroon-red-colored option, from celebrity chef *Rick Bayless* was praised for its "smoky sausage and sweet roasted pepper" accents. "Truly addictive! I would even eat it on ice cream," said one judge.

Cons:: Sweet, with virtually no heat.

The Other Contenders: The Bottom Three

Herdez may be the fifth-best-selling salsa in the U.S., but that did not guarantee it a spot in our Epi winners' circle. Tasters felt it was one-dimensional and lacked "body." One judge compared it to V8 without any flavor. We all agreed that this option would be best utilized as pico de gallo alongside a main course dish instead of on a chip. La Victoria showed no signs of ingredients aside from tomatoes—tasters said it had a pasty and mushy consistency and bland flavor.

Amy's salsa was also not a favorite (though the brand's *frozen pizza* was). The salsa tasted mild (not medium) and not as full-bodied as its competitors. Loyal Amy's fans might want to purchase the "hot" variety rather than "medium."

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