

WOW Members.

I want to thank you for having me give the talk on finishing science. I was looking forward to it. We are sending a pdf of the talk with some additions that we did not have time to cover. In particular, there are a couple of example “recipes” and a slide on which gloves are good for which common situations in woodworking such as mineral spirits, alcohol, glues, and general organic oils. However, some compounds may require specific types or thicknesses of gloves to be safe.

[Please click here for the presentation notes.](#)

A most common question for finishes that we did not have time to finish: “What finishes are food safe?” This will also give me the opportunity to show how material safety data sheets (MSDS or SDS) can help answer this.

The short, but somewhat unsatisfying answer is “In fact, all [modern] finishes are safe to eat off of or be chewed on once the finish has fully cured” Flexner, Understanding Wood Finishes, 3rd edition, pg. 76. You’re probably saying “I don’t believe it”. However, this statement is arguably true given the chemical processes that occur with curing and the removal of lead and other toxins. But considering that plastic and Teflon are considered non-toxic, we may not all agree.

The name on the can does not indicate what’s in it. For example, tung oil may have other stuff in it. In order to find out what really is in our favorite finish we need to look at the MSDS. They are easy to find if you search specifically for “safety data sheet” and the manufactures or distributors website. Generally, we only need to look at the ingredient list. For example, let’s take one of my favorite finishes: Waterlox “100% Tung Oil”. MSDS [https://waterlox.com/images/products/utos/UTOS\\_sds.pdf](https://waterlox.com/images/products/utos/UTOS_sds.pdf). Under ingredients it list 7 items. Only 5-15% is cashew nut oil. We’re not likely to recognize the other compounds so it may not be clearly safe to eat. (It turns out most are solvents. The toxicity indicators in the MSDS are for the liquid or vapors not the cured finish. “Trade secret” is common.)

Are there some finishes that are obviously “food safe”. Things we eat like shellac, oils that are actually only oils, etc. But oils need to cure in most applications so what’s in them? Checking a couple: Mahoney’s Walnut Oil Utility Finish. FDA certified. The only ingredient listed on MSDS is walnut oil. We can be confident of its safety. Tried and True “100% safe for food contact surfaces.” “Linseed oil and beeswax” on the can, MSDS ingredients: “Modified Linseed Oils” and “trade secret”.

So “What finishes are food safe?” Generally, all cured finishes. However, if we want to be more confident with a little effort, we can confirm what’s in them. FDA certification may help if the manufacture has gone to the expense.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any questions. Thanks for giving me this opportunity.

Lary Sanders  
Springfield, OH  
lary\_s@sbcglobal.net