smitten kitchen This is an apple and cheddar salad and I would humbly argue an excellent one, the best I’ve ever made, but this recipe is also an excuse for me to share a few of the best tricks I keep up my sleeve (I always wanted to be a cook who said things like that, when what you might actually find is a lost piece of popcorn) to make the kinds of complex salads I can never resist on a cafe menu at home as simply as possible. Because we deserve to have fancy, cool, crunchy, dynamic, and gorgeous salads at home, even if we do not live a life that allows us to afford fancy salads made by others on a regular basis. The first element follows a basic salad math equation of crispy cheese > fresh cheese. Grated cheese melts in the oven into flakes of golden, lacy cheese crisps that are easier to make and better than most croutons by a mile. I said what I said. The second element stems from my belief that a salad without a pickled element is a sad one. Soaking minced shallot (or onion) in the vinegar portion of your dressing until it lightly pickles while you make the rest of the salad is a most low-effort way to make this happen. The final thing I absolutely love on a busy salad is some kind of candied, spicy, salty nut but I find almost every recipe for them to be too much work, or just too sticky. What I want is one that I could make a whole pan of (double the below for a whole pan) and store extras at room temperature, where they will stay crisp and not merge into one mega-cluster, to use as needed — on tomorrow’s salad, too, or a morning bowl of yogurt, or just snacks, so many snacks. I found the coolest trick buried in a restaurant recipe for their famous kale salad: rinsing (yes, rinsing) nuts and then tossing them with a little bit of powdered sugar, salt, and any spice you’d like (I’m using cayenne) bakes into crisp clusters. In the last year, I’ve used this innumerable times on almost every kind of nut and seed. Now, it’s your turn.