Ricotta Cheese

Popular in baked Italian dishes such as lasagna and manicotti, ricotta is a versatile cheese that can be enjoyed in both savory and sweet dishes—both fresh as well as cooked. Homemade ricotta cheese has a delicate texture that is most enjoyed when eaten raw, either smeared on grilled bread with fine extra-virgin olive oil and sea salt, or with fresh fruit and a drizzle of good honey.

In a large, heavy nonreactive saucepan over medium-high heat, stir together the milk, half-and-half and salt and bring to a full boil, stirring occasionally to prevent scorching. Turn off the heat and add the lemon juice. Stir until the mixture has separated into thick curds and a cloudy liquid (the whey).

Line a large colander with 3 layers of cheesecloth and set over a large bowl. Gently ladle the curds and whey into the colander and let drain for about 15 minutes (or up to 40 minutes for a firmer cheese).

Scrape the ricotta cheese from the cheesecloth into a bowl. It is ready to serve or can be covered and refrigerated for up to 2 days. Makes about 2 cups.

Adapted from a recipe by Williams-Sonoma Culinary Experts.

Oven-Roasted Summer Fruits with Ricotta-Vanilla Cream

Ricotta drizzled with honey is a subtle and sublime addition, adding a lush creaminess to the dish.

Preheat an oven to 475°F.

In a bowl, stir together the ricotta cheese, crème fraîche, vanilla and 2 Tbs. of the sugar. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

Halve the peaches, nectarines and plums and remove the pits. Cut the halves in half again, if desired. Trim off the hard tip of each fig stem and leave the figs whole. Leave the cherries whole. Arrange all the fruits in a single layer in a roasting pan, drizzle with the olive oil and stir the fruits several times. Sprinkle with the remaining 4 Tbs. sugar and stir once or twice.

Roast until the fruits are slightly collapsed and golden or lightly charred, 15 to 20 minutes.

Spoon the fruits and their cooking juices into a serving bowl or individual dessert bowls. (If desired, halve or quarter the figs lengthwise.) Divide the ricotta mixture among small bowls and swirl a little honey into each serving. Place the ricotta alongside the fruit and serve immediately. Serves 6 to 8.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Cheese*, by Georgeanne Brennan (Weldon Owen, Inc., 2010).

Ingredients for Ricotta Cheese

2 quarts whole milk

2 cups half-and-half

1 tsp. salt

¼ cup fresh lemon juice, strained

Ingredients for Oven-Roasted Summer Fruits with Ricotta-Vanilla Cream

1 cup fresh ricotta cheese

¼ cup crème fraîche

½ tsp. vanilla extract

6 Tbs. sugar

2 peaches

2 nectarines

3 plums

8 fresh figs

About ½ lb. cherries (optional)

1 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

Honey for serving

All About Butter

This essential dairy product is made by churning or agitating cream until the fats separate from the liquids, producing a semisolid fat. Butter is most often made from the cream of cow's milk, although it can be churned from the milk of sheep, goats and other mammals as well.

Butter is 80 to 85 percent milk fat. The rest is made up of milk solids (proteins) and water. Butter is sold in two basic styles. More familiar is salted butter, although many cooks favor unsalted butter, also called sweet butter, for two reasons. First, salt in the butter adds to the total amount of salt in a recipe, which can interfere with the taste. Second, unsalted butter is likely to be fresher, since it has no salt, which acts as a preservative and prolongs its shelf life. If you have no choice when shopping, salted butter will work in most cooking recipes (you may want to taste and adjust other salt in the recipe), but it is not recommended as a substitute for unsalted butter in baking.

Storing: Salted butter, if left wrapped and stored in a cold section of the refrigerator, will keep for about 2½ months, while wrapped unsalted butter will store well for about 1½ months. After that, the butter may begin to pick up refrigerator odors, thus losing its delicate flavor. Both types freeze well for up to 6 months in their original packaging. Once unwrapped, salted and unsalted butter should be eaten within 3 weeks. Even if the butter is wrapped, do not keep it longer than 1 week beyond its sell-by date, unless you freeze it.

Adapted from *Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Companion* (Time-Life Books, 2000).

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Technique Class: Lessons in Dairy

All About Cream

People of a certain age may remember the days when the milkman left glass bottles of milk on the back stoop every morning. The unhomogenized milk naturally separated, with the cream rising to the top, hence the vernacular expressions that compare cream and excellence. These days, nearly all commercial milk is homogenized, a process that uniformly disperses the fat throughout the milk, so that the cream cannot separate from it.

Nearly all cream sold by large dairies today is ultra-pasteurized, which involves heating the cream to 300°F to kill certain microorganisms and extend shelf life. However, the process gives the cream a mildly cooked taste and makes it a little harder to whip.

Selecting: Buy the kind of cream called for in a recipe. To make whipped cream, buy heavy cream (whipping cream) or light whipping cream. Light cream and half-and-half will not whip. Some specialty stores and farmers' market sell minimally processed cream that has not been put through the ultra-pasteurization process. This cream whips better but is more perishable. For making sauces, buy heavy cream.

Storing: Store cream in the coldest part of the refrigerator, usually the back of the bottom shelf. Unopened ultra-pasteurized cream will keep for 2 or 3 days after its sell-by date. Heavy cream can be frozen for up to 4 months and used for baking, frostings and sauces, but once frozen and defrosted, it will not whip. When using cream, pour just the amount you need from the carton and return the carton to the refrigerator as quickly as possible. Do not pour room-temperature cream back into the carton; instead, store it separately in a lidded glass jar.

Preparing: Whip chilled heavy or light whipping cream in a metal bowl with a whisk, an egg beater or a handheld mixer, or in a stand mixer fitted with a whisk attachment. For the best results, put the bowl and whisk or beaters in the refrigerator for an hour or more to chill them. Blenders are not recommended, as they do not aerate the cream properly and are apt to whip it into butter. Large amounts of cream can be whipped in a food processor with a specially designed whipping attachment, although the cream will not reach the same billowing heights as it will when whipped in a bowl. Process the cream just until it rises in the bowl and thickens. Take care not to overbeat, which can happen quickly in a food processor. For most uses, whip cream just until it forms soft peaks. For piping, cream should be whipped to stiff peaks, which hold their shape and stand upright when the whisk is lifted.

Adapted from *Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Companion* (Time-Life Books, 2000).

Cream Glossary

- **Heavy Cream:** Labeled heavy whipping cream or just whipping cream, it has the most milk fat, between 36 and 40 percent but averaging about 36 percent. It whips up to a very dense and stable whipped cream, which can be useful for piped cake decorations.
- **Light Whipping Cream:** This cream contains only slightly less milk fat than heavy cream, from 30 to 36 percent. It whips up to a softer, slightly more voluminous whipped cream than heavy cream does.
- **Light Cream:** Similar to half-and-half, this product is also known as coffee cream or table cream and contains 15 to 20 percent milk fat. It cannot be whipped.
- **Half-and-Half:** A mixture of milk and cream, half-and-half contains 10 to 18 percent milk fat. It is used for coffee, to pour over cereal and berries, and in many creamed soup recipes. You can make your own, in a pinch, by combining equal parts milk and heavy cream. Half-and-half cannot be whipped.

Adapted from *Williams-Sonoma Kitchen Companion* (Time-Life Books, 2000).

About Cheese

Most cheeses begin the same way: Milk is warmed, cultured and allowed to ferment. Rennet coagulates the milk, and the solids are shaped and aged. Depending on the culture used or the aging technique, the results vary. You can group cheese by type of milk used, but it's more useful for cooking to categorize them by the length of aging and their final texture. Below are the most common categories for types of cheese:

Fresh: Fresh cheeses are not aged. They are generally made from milk that ferments only briefly before being separated into solid curds and liquid whey. These cheeses don't keep, so they must be eaten shortly after they are made. Since aging creates flavor, fresh cheese are among the most mild. *Examples include chèvre, cottage cheese, cream cheese, fromage frais, fresh mozzarella and ricotta.*

Natural rind: When fresh cheeses are left to sit in a cellar and dry out, they attract natural molds and yeasts from the air that create a soft, often powdery rind. As the cheese sits and ages—even just for a couple of weeks—this surface becomes thicker and the cheese drier and firmer, often developing a nutty flavor and more pungent aroma and taste. *Examples include Banon, Chèvrefeuille, Crottin de Chavignol and Rocamadour.*

Soft-ripened: Soft-ripened cheese are distinguished by their distinctive rind and ripening process. After the milk is coagulated, these cheeses are placed in molds to shape them and then transferred to straw mats and exposed to particular bacteria (including penicillium) that cause them to develop a soft, powdery white covering known as a "bloomy" rind. These cheeses age from the exterior inward, softening as they mature until their centers are creamy and oozy. When cream is added to a soft-ripened cheese, it becomes a double cream or triple cream cheese, know for its rich and buttery center. *Examples include Brie, Brillat-Savarin, Camembert, Humbolt Fog and Neufchâtel.*

Semisoft: This description covers an enormous range of cheeses. Determining whether a cheese should be labeled semisoft is not an exact science. Instead, judgment is intuitive. Semisoft refers to the moisture, or whey, content of a cheese and to its resulting degree of softness (a quality that is not necessarily an indicator of higher fat content, as some mistakenly believe). Semisoft cheeses will keep for a few days longer than fresh ones. In general, the softer the cheese, the shorter the shelf life. *Examples include Chaumes, Havarti, Mont d'Or, Morbier, Port-Salut and raclette. Brie, Camembert, Gorgonzola and Taleggio may be considered semisoft but also fall into other categories—soft-ripened, blue and washed-rind, respectively.*

Washed-rind: Washed-rind cheeses overlap with the semisoft group, but as with the soft-ripened cheeses, they distinguish themselves from other cheeses by their particular aging process and distinctive rind. Medieval monks were the first to develop the technique of washing or rinsing cheeses as they aged with water, brine, wine, beer or brandy, a practice that encourages bacteria to grow. These cheeses are known for their pungent aromas. However, their flavors are often much mellower than their aromas, tasting full and delicious. *Examples include Époisses de Bourgogne, Limburger, Muenster and Taleggio.*

Semifirm: The semifirm category, like semisoft, is based on texture. Longer aging and less moisture are the criteria that separate these cheeses from their semisoft cousins, but again, there is not a clear-cut divide. Many semifirm cheeses can last for three to four weeks after opening a package and even two weeks after slicing. *Examples include Cantal, Cheddar, Colby, Edam, Emmentaler, Fontina, Gouda, Gruyère, Comté, Monterey Jack and Jarlsberg.*

Hard: The firmest-textured cheeses are yielded by "cooking" or heating curds until they solidify, and then pressing and aging over a long period of time. While fresh and soft-ripened cheeses go from the dairy to the table in a matter of days or weeks, hard cheeses take at least months and sometimes more than a year to mature. This lengthy aging dries and hardens the texture and sharpens the flavor. It also ensures that hard cheeses have a longer shelf life than other cheese types. *Examples include Asiago, Manchego, Parmigiano-Reggiano and various types of pecorino and Romano.*

Blue: Although blue cheeses fall variously under the semisoft, soft-ripened and semifirm categories, they must also be considered as a group in their own right, due to one characteristic feature that sets them apart from other cheeses: a network of visible blue mold or veins lacing throughout their interior. These veins are what bring blue cheeses their strong flavor, crumbly texture and striking appearance. *Examples include bleu d'Auvergne, Cabrales, Cashel blue, Danish blue, Gorgonzola dolce and naturale, Maytag blue, Roquefort and Stilton.*

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Cheese,* by Georgeanne Brennan (Weldon Owen, Inc., 2010).

Fromage Blanc

A French-style fresh cheese made from cow's milk, fromage blanc is delicious served with savory accompaniments or additions as well as with sweet ones. This versatile cheese can be enjoyed as an appetizer or as part of a dessert, or used for baking and cooking. For a lighter fromage blanc, you can omit the heavy cream.

In a bowl, gently whisk together the buttermilk and lemon juice until combined.

In a heavy nonreactive saucepan or stockpot, stir together the milk and cream. Stir in the buttermilk-lemon juice mixture, set over low heat and heat the mixture very slowly until it reaches 175°F. While the mixture is heating, stir it only 2 to 4 times with a heatproof spatula. When the mixture reaches 175°F, remove the pot from the heat and let it rest for 15 minutes; do not stir during this time. You will see curds beginning to form.

Line a large colander with 3 layers of cheesecloth and set over a large bowl. Gently ladle the curds and whey into the colander and let drain until the drips of whey slow, about 5 minutes. Bring the corners of the cheesecloth together and tie into a pouch. Hang the pouch over a bowl and let drain until the cheese reaches the desired consistency; the longer it drains, the firmer the cheese will be.

After the cheese has reached the desired consistency, scrape it from the cheesecloth into a bowl and stir in the salt. Refrigerate until ready to use, up to 1 week. Makes about 2 cups.

Adapted from a recipe by Williams-Sonoma Culinary Experts.

Presenting Cheese

Cheese is always a versatile offering. Serve it on its own or with accompaniments—spreads such as chutneys, jams or tapenades; sweet elements, like honeycomb or fresh, dried or candied fruits; or salty bites, such as olives or nuts—and a crusty baguette.

Cheese plates: An assortment of three cheeses offers variety without overwhelming guests. When making your selections, diversity can be created in different ways: cheese age or type (one bloomy rind, one semifirm, one blue); milk type (one cow's milk, one goat's milk, one sheep's milk); country of origin (one French, one Spanish, one English); or even locale (three from California). You'll want a range of flavors and textures, from creamy and buttery to crumbly and salty, and a mix of shapes and colors. Choose accompaniments to match the cheese, season and occasion, keeping flavor and texture in mind.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Cheese,* by Georgeanne Brennan (Weldon Owen, Inc., 2010).

Ingredients for Fromage Blanc

2 cups buttermilk

2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice, strained

2 quarts whole milk

1 cup heavy cream (optional—see note left)

½ tsp. salt (optional)