



Flavor homemade yogurt cheese with anything you like. The creamy texture and tangy flavor blend deliciously with fresh herbs, chopped garlic, or pungent spices like black pepper.

Turn Yogurt into Cheese

How can something so easy be so good—and low in fat, too?

BY ANNE STERLING

I often long for those snow-white, unripened cheeses displayed in cheesecloth bundles in the dairy shops of Paris, where I lived for many years. That's when I make my own yogurt cheese. It's similar to the French *fromage frais* I'm homesick for, even though the authentic cheese doesn't start out as yogurt. Yogurt cheese is easy to make and it's versatile (see the box above right), delicious alone or mixed into other dishes. It has a creamy texture, even when made with nonfat yogurt, and because of that, it's been hailed as a "miracle" substitute for high-fat cream cheese, mayonnaise, and sour cream.

JUST ADD YOGURT AND WAIT

Making yogurt cheese couldn't be simpler: just spoon some yogurt into a filter and wait. The liquid whey drains out, leaving the thick and creamy milk solids and butterfat behind. By controlling the draining time, I can make the cheese light or dense and spreadable.

The only difficult step in the process is choosing the yogurt, which can range from very tart to quite

bland. Though the protein in the drained milk solids buffers the acid taste, the taste of the cheese will be similar to the taste of the undrained yogurt, so choose a yogurt that tastes good to you right out of the carton. Check the expiration date to get the freshest possible batch.

Making your own yogurt can save money if you plan to make pounds of cheese. It may also be necessary if you want a richer cheese made from whole milk. Many stores only carry low- and nonfat yogurts. Yogurt cheese made from whole milk will blend more smoothly in warm dishes and will stay creamy when toasted under the broiler. Nonfat yogurt cheese gets chewy and crumbly when broiled. There's only one rule to follow when choosing yogurt—don't use yogurt that contains gelatin, because gelatin inhibits the whey from draining. Pectin, which is found in some brands of yogurt, will not interfere with draining.

PICK A FLAVOR

Yogurt cheese is great just plain, but I like to add a little salt (about one teaspoon per quart of yogurt), and often I'll add other savory ingredients. Some possibilities include fresh herbs, curry powder, minced garlic, or chopped black olives. Experiment by mixing the flavoring ingredient into a little

What to do with your homemade cheese

- Roll bite-sized balls in chopped nuts or chopped fresh herbs to eat as canapés
- Marinate bite-sized balls in olive oil and rosemary to serve as a snack or on a salad
- Pipe into hollowed-out vegetables for hors d'oeuvres
- Arrange slices on rounds of French bread, broil, and serve with a salad or soup
- Mix with chutney to use as a dip or spread
- Mix with rice for stuffed grape leaves
- Spread on crackers or bagels
- Mix with honey and make “cream-filled” sandwich cookies
- Stir into guacamole
- Blend with pesto and toss with pasta—A.S.

yogurt and do a taste test. Just remember the final product will be creamy and more mellow.

I stir any flavorings into the yogurt before I put it in the filter to drain; this allows the flavors to ripen. Also, if I'm aiming for a firm cheese, it's easier to shape if the flavorings are added first. Stirring them in after draining could loosen the texture.

THE SETUP

To begin your cheesemaking, you need to assemble your draining equipment. A funnel lined with several thicknesses of cheesecloth or an unbleached coffee filter is one option. I usually use my old coffeemaker cone, lined with a filter. Recently, though, I bought a handy device made specifically for the purpose—The Really Creamy Yogurt Cheese Funnel—which drains two cups of yogurt, requires no paper filter or cheesecloth, and comes apart to store flat in a drawer. Set this funnel over a large measuring cup or a jar.

Whether to drain the yogurt in or out of the refrigerator is up to you. In principle, the high acid level of the yogurt inhibits the growth of harmful bacteria at room temperature, but there's no way to judge how acid the yogurt really is (taste is not an indication). The yogurt drains slightly faster at room temperature, and the taste seems slightly better. But for safety, it's a good idea to drain the cheese in the refrigerator. Place a saucer on top of the funnel or fit a plastic bag over the top to keep out refrigerator odors.

THE RESULTS

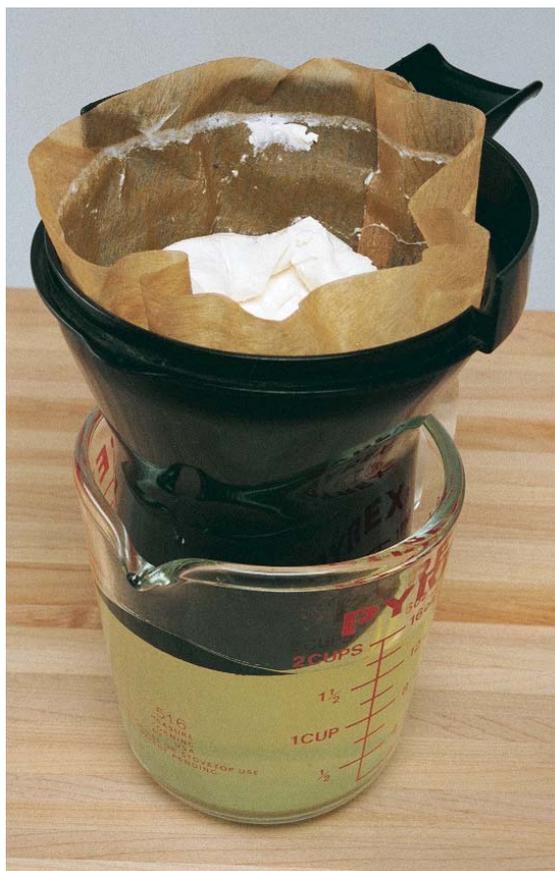
Yields will vary slightly between types of yogurt, different brands, and even from season to season. After an hour or two of draining, you should have a creamy consistency, much like sour cream. For a thick yogurt cheese that can be shaped and sliced, drain at least 8 and up to 24 hours. One quart of yogurt yields about 1½ cups of firm cheese and 2½ cups of whey.

The whey is delicious and nutritious, so don't discard it. Do as the Lebanese do and add mint and

ice for a refreshing beverage, or use it in place of water to make rice.

When the cheese has drained to the consistency you want, remove it from the filter. You can mold it into a log shape by rolling it up in plastic wrap or wax paper, or you can roll it between your palms into canapé-size balls. Cover the cheese in plastic wrap and keep it refrigerated until you're ready to serve it. The cheese gets more tart with age, so plan to eat it within a week.

Anne Sterling is a former director of La Varenne Cooking School in Paris. She now teaches food classes for adults and children in New Jersey. ♦



The setup is simple. Sterling puts the yogurt in a coffee filter set in the cone from her coffeemaker. The whey drains from the yogurt, leaving a thick and creamy “cheese.”

Photos: Robert Marsala