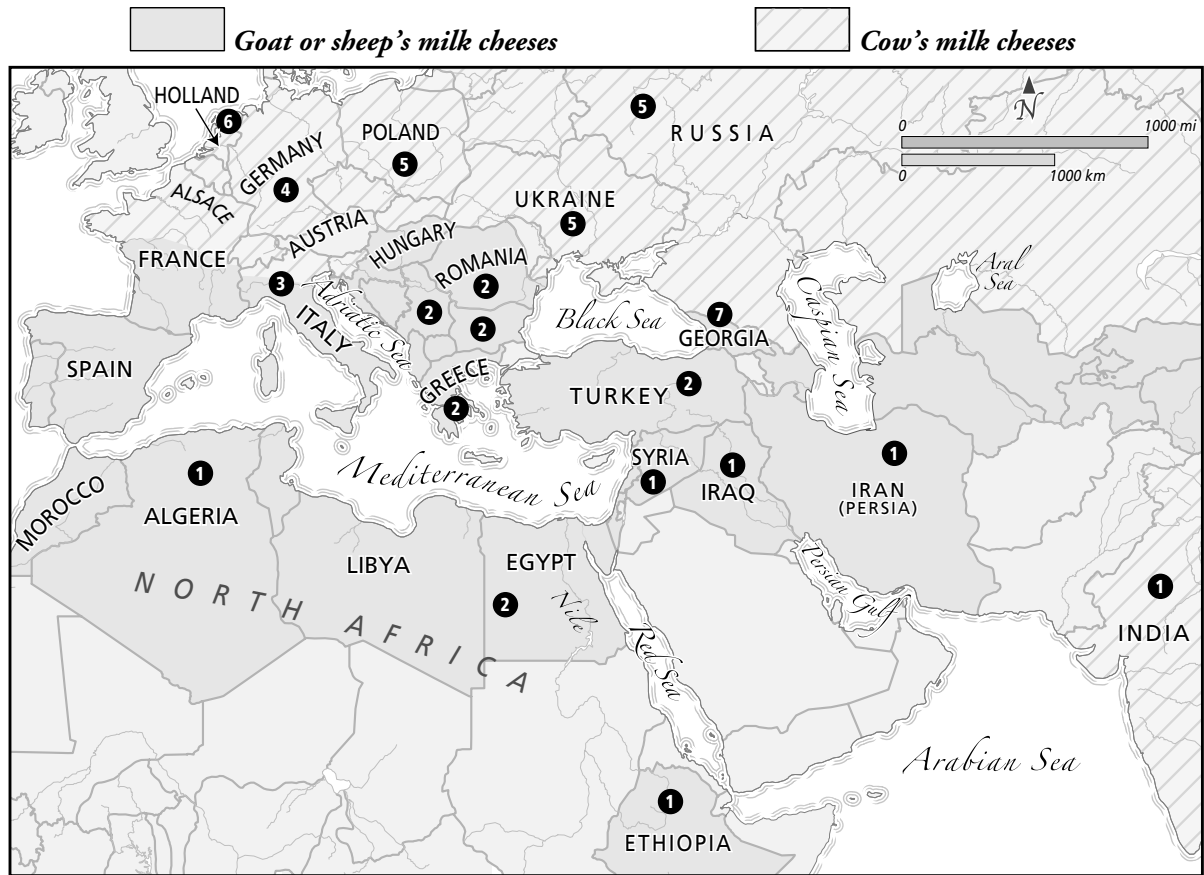


CHEESE AND DAIRY SPREADS



According to legend, a Middle Eastern herdsman nearly six thousand years ago stored some milk in a sack made from a calf or lamb's stomach (waterproof animal organs then providing the best portable containers for liquid), only to discover later that the milk had separated. Sampling the coagulated curds—what we call fresh cheese—he realized that it was not only tasty but longer lasting than milk. By 2000 B.C.E., fresh cheese was a common food throughout the area, as attested by the discovery in Middle Eastern archeological digs of numerous small cheese molds replete with holes for draining. Later, the Romans discovered that cooking the milk to produce curds, pressing the curds, soaking the cheese in salt, and aging it for several months produced hard cheeses. Pliny the Elder (c. 77 C.E.) described many of the cheeses favored by Roman gourmets, including ones similar to Swiss and blue. While the basics of cheese making remain relatively unchanged from Roman times, there are now more than two thousand varieties around the globe.

Cheese is created when the solid portion of the milk of a few cloven-hoofed, cud-chewing animals is separated from a liquid called whey. Goat and sheep cheeses are most prevalent in the Middle East and Mediterranean. (When the Bible spoke of “a land flowing with milk and honey,” it was referring to goat's milk.) The amazing aspect of cheese making is how small differences in the procedure—including the kind of milk, the amount of salt and other flavorings added, the temperature at which the milk is heated, the pressing, and the length of aging—result in major changes in the cheese's flavor, color, texture, and aroma. Raw milk from cheese-producing animals differs little in taste and color. However, goat's milk cheese has a more



The Predominant Cheeses of the Old World: 1 soft white cheeses: queso blanco, jibneh, paneer; 2 feta, kashkaval; 3 Parmesan, mozzarella, ricotta; 4 Muenster, topfen, quark; 5 farmer cheese; 6 Edam, Gouda 7 suluguni, imeruli, feta

piquant flavor and a whiter color than cow's milk cheese. Sheep's milk cheese is also white but carries a distinctly sharp flavor.

To make cheese, a bacterial culture is added to fresh milk to convert the lactose into lactic acid, which balances the pH level; then rennet or an

acid is added to coagulate the milk, separating the curds from the whey. The curd is then heated, drained, and salted. Cheese made from these fresh, unripened curds (fresh cheeses), which include cottage cheese, farmer cheese, and chèvre, have a high moisture content and are unripened or only

slightly ripened, resulting in a soft texture and a mild, sometimes slightly acidic flavor. The younger the cheese, the milder it will taste. Soaking or boiling a drained soft cheese, such as feta, in brine, stops the ripening process, which allows for longer storage and gives the cheese a saltier flavor. Hard cheeses are made by pressing the curds into molds and leaving them to ripen by the action of microorganisms, allowing for a range of possibilities in flavor and texture much greater than what is found in fresh cheeses.

Hard cheeses require kosher supervision to ensure adherence to Talmudic dictums, which prescribe avoiding unkosher rennet, enzymes, and milk. Therefore, hard cheeses were rarely prominent and frequently nonexistent in most Jewish communities. All of the Jewish cheeses in northern Europe are the curd type, primarily made from cow's milk and occasionally goat's milk. (Each goat produces about one gallon of milk a day, which yields about one pound of cheese.) On the other hand, Ashkenazim in Romania, influenced by the Ottomans during their control of the region, make various soft and hard goat and sheep's cheeses, frequently brined, most notably *bryndza* and *kashkaval*. The principal cheeses of Georgia are *suluguni* (string cheese), *imeruli* (a fresh, slightly sour cheese), and *bryndza* (a creamy, less salty type of feta). Sephardim, Italians, and Greek Jews, on the other hand, enjoy a variety of fresh and hard cheeses made from cow, sheep, and goat's milk. For centuries, many eastern European meals consisted solely of potatoes or black bread and curd cheese. Ashkenazim, some of whom owned their own cow or goat for providing homemade cheese and sour cream, ate curd cheese on a regular basis, commonly mixed with chopped cucumbers and radishes, mixed into noodles, and as a filling for various pastries, including kreplach, blintzes,

knishes, and strudels. The original Hanukkah latke (pancake) was made from curd cheese; potato latkes did not become popular until the middle of the nineteenth century. In a more elaborate dish, curd cheese was sweetened, fruit sometimes added, and then baked. In Romania, Galicia, and Ukraine, cheese was frequently added to or layered with *mamaliga* (cornmeal mush) for dairy meals.

For millennia, many Mediterranean housewives weekly made their own soft, white fresh cheese, called *queso blanco* by Sephardim and *jiben beida* in Arabic, which went into their everyday cooking. Jews in the Ottoman Empire adopted various local Turkish and Greek cheeses. The cheese variety in the generally mountainous Balkans—Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia—was greater than that of eastern Europe, although much less so than that of western Europe. Jews in the Middle East primarily use goat cheese, including feta and labni (yogurt cheese). Goat cheese's intense flavor marries well with many other Middle Eastern foods, especially eggplant, olives, tomatoes, and bell peppers. The simplicity of feta's flavor makes it a perfect complement to bread and olives, as well as an important ingredient in vegetable dishes and pastry fillings. Sephardim used both soft (similar to pot cheese, chèvre, and feta) and hard (similar to kashkaval, Gouda, and Parmesan) kinds of cheeses, which they commonly cooked with vegetables to make dishes such as leek and cheese casserole, spinach and cheese casserole, and cheese-stuffed tomatoes.

What You Should Know: High and prolonged heat causes cheese to become stringy and tough. Therefore, always melt cheese over a low temperature for a very short time. Shred cheese for quick, even blending into sauces.

FAVORITE ASHKENAZIC CHEESES

- **POT CHEESE:** Also called baker's cheese and hoop cheese. A partially drained curd, ideal for filling baked goods. In the Roman manner, the curds were frequently placed in a bread basket to drain.
- **FARMER CHEESE:** A drained curd mixed with a little cream.
- **COTTAGE CHEESE:** A relatively bland fresh cheese with a slightly acidic flavor, historically made by exposing the milk to natural bacteria, which coagulates the protein, separating the curds and whey. Today, this unripe cheese is generally made by adding a bacterial culture to milk to produce lactic acid. Since a creaming mixture is added to store brands, cottage cheese needs to be well drained for use in pastry fillings.
- **BRYNDZA/BRYNZA:** A soft, crumbly white Balkan and Caucasian goat cheese that tends to be milder and less salty than the better-known feta. It is closest to Bulgarian feta. Production was historically from March to October, during grazing season; salting allowed it to be stored through the winter without a loss of quality. Bryndza is the primary Romanian, Slovakian, and Ukrainian cheese, eaten sliced and drizzled with an herb vinaigrette, used in dumplings, or served as an accompaniment to *mamaliga* (cornmeal mush). If substituting a very salty feta for the bryndza, soak it in cold water for a few hours to remove some of the saline.

FAVORITE SEPHARDIC CHEESES

- **FETA** (“slice” in Greek, as the 10- to 30-pound blocks of cheese are cut into wedges, then brined): A well-known brined cheese common to Turkey and the Balkans. Barreled feta is creamier and milder than the sharper and saltier tinned type. This crumbly cheese is primarily made from sheep’s milk, but occasionally from goat’s milk as well. Sheep’s milk feta has a slightly nutty flavor and a texture that ranges from creamy to dry. Feta made from goat’s milk has a slightly tangier flavor and whiter color than sheep’s milk feta. Bulgarian feta tends to be creamier and less salty than feta from Greece. Most feta in the West is imported, and the type of milk and brining should be on the label.
- **HALLOUMI**: A Turkish and Balkan full-fat sheep and cow’s milk semifirm cheese similar to feta but milder and firmer, so it will not crumble when sliced.
- **JIBEN**: Homemade Middle Eastern white cheese.
- **KASSERI/KASHER** (meaning “kosher” cheese): A firm, slightly piquant but not very flavorful Greek sheep’s milk cheese aged for six months to a year. Look for a smooth off-white interior.
- **KASHKAVAL**: Similar to kasseri and based on the Italian caciocavallo. The basic firm cheese in Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria. It is made from sheep’s milk or a combination of sheep and cow’s milk. When aged for two to three months, kashkaval is mild and used for the table; more mature cheeses, with the color of straw, are stronger and used for grating.
- **KEFALOTYRI** (*keafalo* means “head” in Greek, referring to the size and shape of this cheese): Made from either sheep or goat’s milk, this is a hard, yellow, tangy Balkan cheese used for grating and shredding. Parmesan and Romano, although harder and saltier, or an aged kashkaval make good substitutes.
- **MANOURI**: A soft Greek sheep’s milk cheese with a buttery flavor and texture.
- **MITZITHRA**: Made from feta and kefalotyri by-products, this is similar to sheep’s milk ricotta.
- **TOULOUMI**: A pungent goat cheese aged in brine.

SOUR CREAM

Back when my mother's Lithuanian grandparents moved to Cleveland, Ohio in 1904, my great grandmother made her own sour cream (*smetane*), similar to the now chic *crème fraîche*, by mixing some buttermilk into heavy cream and letting it stand at room temperature for a day. Doing this was a necessity, as commercial sour cream was not yet available in many parts of the United States. You can make an approximation using the same method: Heat 2 cups heavy cream (not ultra-pasteurized) to lukewarm (85°F), remove from the heat, stir in 2 tablespoons active-culture buttermilk or yogurt, pour into a sterilized jar or thermos, cover, and let stand at room temperature until thickened, about 8 to 12 hours. The sour cream will keep, refrigerated, for up to 12 days.

In 1882, Lithuanian immigrants Isaac and Joseph Breakstone (Bregstein) opened a small shop on Manhattan's Lower East Side that sold traditional eastern European dairy products, most notably butter, curd cheeses, and sour cream. They would scoop the sour cream out of large barrels into receptacles that the customers would bring from home. By 1912, the brothers were operating two manufacturing plants in New York State, selling wholesale butter, soft cheeses, and sour cream. In 1920, the Breakstone Company began mass marketing cream cheese, which first appeared in New York in 1872, based on France's Neufchatel; it quickly became popular among New York's Jews. When in the 1930s, innovation led to sour cream being sold in small wax-coated paper containers (Breakstone being the first to market consumer-sized packages of sour cream), this Old World ingredient spread across the United States, becoming a standard of the American kitchen. (Even my great grandmother began purchasing sour cream at the store but would occasionally still make her own, preferring its incomparable tang.)

ROMANIAN GOAT CHEESE SPREAD

Pashtet iz Bryndza



ABOUT 2 CUPS

One popular use for sour cream was this cheese spread. Similar to the Austrian liptauer and Hungarian korozot. It originated as a way to use leftover soft goat cheese. Romanian and Bulgarian feta cheeses tend to be much creamier and less salty, resulting in a smoother texture and milder flavor than those from Greece and Turkey. Serve with mamaliga (Romanian Cornmeal Mush, page 379) or slices of Italian or black bread.

- 3 tablespoons sour cream or plain yogurt
- 8 ounces (1½ cups crumbled) bryndza (fresh goat cheese) or mild, creamy feta cheese
- 1 hard-cooked egg, chopped
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh dill
- 1 clove garlic, mashed with a pinch of salt
- Ground black pepper to taste
- Black olives for garnish (optional)

Mix the sour cream into the cheese until smooth. Stir in the egg, dill, garlic, and pepper. Cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours or up to 1 week. Garnish with the olives.

VARIATION

Central European Cheese Spread (*Liptauer/Korozott*): This spread was originally made from a soft, white sheep cheese called *lipto*. Omit the egg and dill. Add 1 tablespoon sweet paprika, 2 teaspoons caraway seeds, ½ teaspoon dry mustard, 2 chopped scallions or 2 tablespoons minced onion, and, if desired, 1 tablespoon drained capers.

PERSIAN SPINACH AND YOGURT SALAD

Borani Esfanaj

6 TO 8 SERVINGS



No Persian dairy meal would be complete without a borani, a yogurt and vegetable dish that is common in Persian cooking and particularly refreshing in hot weather. The name derives from the first woman to rule Persia thirteen hundred years ago: a queen named Poorandikhht (or Pouran), who supposedly had a particular fondness for yogurt. Over the centuries, the pronunciation of pooran evolved into boran (the suffix “i” means “with”). Spinach, eggplant, and cucumber are the three favorite types of borani. In this version, the currylike spices complement the tangy yogurt and the slightly bitter, earthy spinach. Other recipes feature mint or fennel. If your yogurt is watery, drain it in a sieve lined with cheesecloth or a coffee filter for about 1 hour. Borani is served as an appetizer, a side dish, or a dip for bread.

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2 large onions, chopped or thinly sliced
- 4 to 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- About 1 teaspoon cayenne or a few drops hot sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 2 pounds fresh spinach, stemmed, washed, and chopped, or 20 ounces thawed frozen spinach, squeezed dry
- 2 cups plain yogurt
- About 1 teaspoon table salt or 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- About 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper

1. In a large saucepan, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onions and sauté until golden, about 15 minutes. Stir in the garlic and sauté for 1 minute. Add the cumin, turmeric, cayenne, and cinnamon and sauté for about 2 minutes. Add the spinach and sauté until wilted, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and let cool.

2. In a medium bowl, combine the yogurt, salt, pepper, and, if using, hot sauce. Stir into the spinach. The mixture should be rather thick. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour or up to 1 day to let the flavors meld. Serve cold or at room temperature.

VARIATIONS

Persian Borani with Fennel: Omit the cumin, turmeric, cayenne, and cinnamon and add 1/2 teaspoon fennel seeds.

Persian Borani with Mint: Omit the cumin, turmeric, cayenne, and cinnamon and add, with the yogurt, 2 tablespoons minced fresh spearmint or 2 teaspoons dried, about 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, and, if desired, 1/2 cup chopped toasted walnuts.

Persian Borani with Eggs: Omit the yogurt. After the spinach is wilted, make 6 indentations in the spinach, break 1 egg into each indentation, and cook over low heat until the eggs are set, about 5 minutes.

TURKISH CUCUMBER AND YOGURT SALAD

Toroto

ABOUT 6 CUPS



The classic pairing of yogurt and cucumber yields endless variations in different locales, from the traditional Middle Eastern dill or mint version to Indian pistachio raita. Jewish versions are inevitably flavored with garlic. This recipe calls for English or hothouse cucumbers, which have very few seeds and so do not require seeding. In addition, English cucumbers are not waxed but rather sold shrinkwrapped to inhibit moisture loss; therefore, peeling is optional. If you use regular cucumbers, peel and seed them. Thinly slice or cut up the cucumbers to serve the dish as a salad; grate or dice them to make a delicious dip for toasted pita triangles or naan.

- 1 large English (hothouse) cucumber, coarsely grated, diced for a dip, cut into chunks or thinly sliced for a salad
- 1 small onion, chopped, or 2 to 3 scallions, sliced
- About 2 teaspoons table salt or 4 teaspoons kosher salt for sprinkling
- 2 to 3 cloves garlic
- 1/4 teaspoon table salt or 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 3 cups thick yogurt
- 1/8 teaspoon ground white or black pepper
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh dill, 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro, or 1/2 cup chopped watercress

1. Put the cucumber and onion in a colander or large sieve, toss with the salt, weigh down with a plate, and let stand at room temperature for at least 1 hour or up to 3 hours. Drain, then squeeze out the excess moisture. (This keeps the salad from turning watery.)

2. Using the tip of a heavy knife or with a mortar and pestle, mash the garlic and salt into a paste. In a large bowl, combine the yogurt, garlic, pepper, and dill. Add the cucumber and toss to coat. Cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours or up to 2 days.

VARIATIONS

Turkish Cucumber, Mint, and Yogurt Dip (Cacik): Finely chop the cucumber. Substitute 3 tablespoons chopped fresh spearmint or 1 teaspoon dried mint for the dill, and stir in 2 to 3 tablespoons olive oil.

Greek Zucchini and Yogurt Salad (Kolokithakia Salata): Blanch 3 pounds whole zucchini in boiling water for 2 minutes, remove with tongs, immerse in ice water to stop the cooking, drain well, thinly slice or chop, then chill. Substitute the zucchini for the cucumber and add 2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill and 2 tablespoons chopped fresh spearmint.

Indian Cucumber and Yogurt Salad (Cucumber Raita): Omit the dill and add 1 tablespoon seeded and minced jalapeño chili and 1 teaspoon ground cumin.

Indian Cucumber, Pistachio, and Yogurt Salad (Cucumber and Pistachio Raita): In a small, dry skillet over medium heat, stir 2 teaspoons ground cumin, 1/2 teaspoon celery seeds, 1/2 teaspoon mustard seeds, 1/2 teaspoon ground cardamom, 1/2 teaspoon ground coriander, and 1/4 teaspoon cayenne until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer to a small bowl and let cool. Substitute this mixture for the dill and add 1 cup (5 ounces) coarsely chopped pistachio nuts.

ETHIOPIAN CHEESE SPREAD

Lab

ABOUT 2 CUPS



In Ethiopia, dairy products were generally produced from cow's milk; sheep and goats were reserved for their wool and occasionally their meat. This tangy dip was made with homemade cheese created by naturally occurring bacteria that generated lactic acid, resulting in a tangy taste. Lab is daily fare in an Ethiopian home; several tablespoons are served for each diner on injera (a pancakelike flat bread that doubles as a tablecloth). Since most available fresh cheeses lack the distinct tang of homemade products, you should add a little lemon zest to simulate the original. Serve with injera (Ethiopian pancake bread) or various flat breads.

- 1 pound farmer cheese, pot cheese, or mild fresh goat cheese (such as fromage blanc or chèvre)
- 2 to 4 tablespoons plain yogurt
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley or cilantro
- 1 to 3 teaspoons grated lemon zest
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil or 1/2 teaspoon dried
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- About 1 teaspoon table salt or 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- About 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper

In a large bowl, combine all the ingredients and stir to blend. The mixture should be moist but thick enough to maintain its shape.

MIDDLE EASTERN YOGURT CHEESE

Labni

ABOUT 1 1/4 CUPS



Labni, a kind of thickened yogurt (from leban, Arabic for "yogurt"), was developed as a delicious way to extend yogurt's shelf life and utility. Middle Easterners dip flat bread in labni sprinkled with chopped fresh dill, mint, or thyme. It also makes a low-fat substitute for cream cheese and sour cream in many recipes, such as Middle Eastern Yogurt Filling (page 163) and Persian Fried Eggplant in Yogurt (page 244). I also use it to make a low-fat cheesecake, substituting it for the cream cheese and sour cream, and as a filling for blintzes.

- About 3/4 teaspoon table salt or 1 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 3 cups (1 1/2 pounds) plain yogurt

1. Stir the salt into the yogurt. Line a colander or sieve with a coffee filter or a double layer of cheesecloth and place over a bowl to catch the whey. Pour the yogurt into the prepared colander, cover with plastic wrap, place in the refrigerator, and let drain until thick and firm: After 24 hours, the yogurt will have the consistency of cream cheese; after 48 hours it will be very thick, like a firm goat cheese. (Use the whey in baking and soups.)

2. Gather together the edges of the cheesecloth to form a sack and gently squeeze out the excess whey. Scrape the cheese from the cloth. Store in a covered container in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

VARIATIONS

Middle Eastern Yogurt with Za'atar (*Labni ma Za'atar*): Spread the *labni* over a serving platter, drizzle with olive oil, and sprinkle with *za'atar* (Middle Eastern “Hyssop” Mixture, page 436).

Middle Eastern Yogurt Cheese Balls (*Zanakeel Labni*): Form heaping tablespoons of the *labni* into balls and let them stand at room temperature overnight to firm and ferment. Place in sterilized jars and cover with olive oil. If desired, add 1 dried red chili and a sprig of fresh rosemary to the jar. Makes about 24 balls.

Spinach Dip (*Sabanigh Labni*): Stir in 10 ounces thawed and drained frozen chopped spinach, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped scallions, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley, 3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, about $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon dill. Cover and refrigerate for at least 8 hours before serving.



INDIAN WHITE CHEESE

Panir

ABOUT 1 CUP



Panir is a soft, crumbly, slightly rubbery unripened Indian cheese similar to queso blanco (white cheese). It is not the same as queso fresco (fresh cheese). In India, it is generally not eaten by itself but rather incorporated into various dishes, absorbing the flavors. Because it is difficult to make panir with the appropriate elastic texture from pasteurized milk, you can approximate the results by substituting fresh mozzarella. Serve panir with vegetables, pasta, and in stir-fries.

4 cups whole goat or cow's milk

2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup plain yogurt

1. In a large, heavy nonreactive saucepan, bring the milk to a boil, stirring frequently to prevent scorching. Reduce the heat to low and stir until the milk reaches about 185°F.

2. Stir the lemon juice into the yogurt. Add to the milk and stir in one direction for about 10 seconds. Remove from the heat and stir until the curds separate and the whey turns yellow, about 1 minute. If the curds fail to form within 1 minute, briefly return to the heat and add a little more lemon juice. Remove from the heat, cover, and let stand for 10 minutes.

3. Line a colander with a triple layer of cheesecloth and set over a large bowl to catch the whey. Gently pour in the milk mixture and let stand for several minutes. When most of the whey has drained, bring the corners of the cloth together, tie them, hang the bag over a bowl, and let the mixture drain for 1 to 3 hours. The curds should be soft and moist. Panir keeps in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

VARIATIONS

Pot Cheese: Substitute $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons distilled white vinegar for the lemon juice and yogurt.

Kneaded Panir: Knead the drained curds into a firm, round ball, about 7 minutes, then pat into a $\frac{1}{2}$ - to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick disk, tie in cheesecloth, and weight with a heavy object for about 2 hours.

Fried Panir: Cut the *chonti panir*, above, into $\frac{1}{2}$ - to $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch chunks. In a large heavy skillet, heat $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch vegetable oil over medium heat to 350°F. In batches, fry the cheese chunks, turning, until golden brown on all sides, about 30 seconds per batch. Drain. The fried chunks are cooked with sugar and condensed milk (*chanar payesh*), in sugar syrup, coated in a chickpea flour batter and deep-fried (*panir pakora*), with peas in spicy tomato sauce (*matar panir*), with spinach (*palak panir*), and added to various vegetable dishes.



SYRIAN WHITE CHEESE

Jiben

ABOUT 1 POUND



Among the first interviews that I conducted for Kosher Gourmet Magazine was one with Rae Dayan at her home in Flatbush, Brooklyn. She generously gave me instructions for a variety of enticing Syrian dishes, including this surprisingly simple homemade cheese, also called queso fresco (fresh cheese) in Ladino. The drained and pressed cheese was also cut into large chunks and rubbed with kosher salt or soaked in a brine to make feta. Syrian housewives commonly made white cheese on a weekly basis, using it in numerous dishes, including bulgur pilavi (Turkish Bulgur Pilaf, page 371), keskasune (Syrian Tiny Pasta with Chickpeas, page 401), calsones (Sephardic Filled Pasta, page 410), and edgeh (Syrian Omelets, page 419). Rennet separates the curds from the whey; it comes in liquid and tablet form made from animal or vegetable sources. Store liquid rennet in the refrigerator for up to two years; dilute in water before using.

8 cups whole milk, preferably unhomogenized
1 teaspoon kosher liquid rennet dissolved in
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup distilled water
2 tablespoons kosher salt

1. In a medium saucepan, heat the milk until lukewarm (88°F); maintain at this temperature for about 10 minutes. Remove from the heat, stir in the rennet, and let stand at room temperature without disturbing until the mixture congeals, about 2 hours.

2. Gently stir the mixture until the whey separates from the curds. Let stand at room temperature for about 30 minutes. (The mixture will look like a thin yogurt with the curds below and a yellowish liquid surrounding it.) Pour off as much liquid (whey) as possible. (Reserve the whey to use in soups and other dishes.)

3. Line a colander or basket with a double thickness of cheesecloth, pour in the curds, and sprinkle with 1 tablespoon of the salt. Let stand at room temperature to drain for 12 to 20 hours.

4. Gather the ends of the cloth together and squeeze the remaining liquid from the curds, about 5 minutes. The curds will amass into a firm ball.

5. Sprinkle $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons of the salt into a shallow bowl, place the cheese on top, and sprinkle with the remaining $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt. Cover and refrigerate for 1 hour. Wrap the cheese in plastic wrap and store in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

INDIAN CLARIFIED BUTTER

Ghee

ABOUT 1/2 CUP



Ghee and samneh (see *Variations*) are essential ingredients in many forms of cookery throughout parts of Asia and Africa, especially in central and northern India, where a little is spooned over legumes for flavor and smoothness, utilized as a bread spread, and used for frying in dishes such as Indian Split Pea Soup (page 136), Cochini Mixed Vegetable Soup (page 124), Calcutta Curried Potatoes (page 275), and Indian Curried Spinach (page 283).

It is advisable to clarify butter in large batches: Preparing ghee or samneh with less than 1 pound of butter may cause it to burn. Also, while it takes a long time to prepare, ghee lasts indefinitely. The larger the amount of fresh butter used and more water it contains, the longer the cooking time. For those who do not have the time or patience to make their own ghee, several companies sell brands with kosher certification.

1 pound (4 sticks) unsalted butter, preferably organic, cut into pieces

1. In a heavy 4-cup saucepan, melt the butter over medium-low heat, about 10 minutes. The butter will bubble, crackle, and foam. Using a dry spoon, skim the foam from the surface. (At this stage, the yellow liquid could be poured off from the whitish solids on the bottom into a container, yielding European clarified, or drawn, butter.)

2. To make the ghee: Reduce the heat to very low. If any ripples appear on the surface of the butter during cooking, reduce the heat. Continue cooking, without stirring or moving the pan, occasionally skimming off the foam, until the butter turns a clear golden color, the white solids sink to the bottom of

the pan, and the butter stops crackling (indicating the absence of water), about 45 minutes. When skimming the foam, make sure the spoon is dry, as you do not want to introduce any water. At this stage, all the water has been removed, yielding ghee, but many Indians prefer to cook the butter longer, developing a nutty flavor. (For a lighter, clearer clarified butter, skip to Step 4.)

3. To make nutty ghee: A heat diffuser is helpful in preventing burning but is not essential. Continue cooking over very low heat until the white sediment on the bottom turns golden brown, about 30 additional minutes. Do not overcook (watch closely) or the solids will burn, imparting a bitter flavor.

4. Remove from the heat, skim off any crust from the surface, and let stand until all the solids have settled to the bottom but the ghee is still warm, about 10 minutes. Pour the clear golden liquid (ghee) through a double layer of cheesecloth or a coffee filter into a dry, clean glass jar or a crock, leaving the solids on the bottom or the cloth. The leftover solids go well with vegetables, rice, and bread. Cover the ghee and store in a cool, dry place for up to 4 months or in the refrigerator for up to a year. The ghee will solidify but not harden.

VARIATIONS

Middle Eastern Clarified Butter (*Samneh*): After skimming off the foam in Step 1, cook the butter over medium-low heat until it stops crackling (indicating the absence of water) and turns a clear golden color, about 45 minutes. For a fresh flavor, place in the refrigerator. For a pungent flavor, let stand in a cool, dry place for 1 to 2 weeks, then store in the refrigerator. For Yemenite *samneh*, after skimming off the foam in Step 1, add 2 tablespoons fenugreek seeds, then strain after cooking. With the exception of clarified butter, Yemenites ate few dairy products, even yogurt. In Israel, traditionalists still use only *samneh* but many adopted yogurt into their diet.

Ethiopian Spiced Clarified Butter (*Niter Kebbeh*): After skimming off the foam in Step 1, add 1/4 cup minced onion, 1 1/2 tablespoons minced garlic, 2 teaspoons minced fresh ginger, 2 to 3 crushed green cardamom pods or 1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom, 1 (2-inch) stick cinnamon, 2 to 3 whole cloves, 3/4 teaspoon ground turmeric, 1/8 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg,

and, if desired, 1/4 teaspoon ground fenugreek. For a nondairy *niter kebbeh*, vegetable oil is substituted for the butter, simmered with the spices for 45 minutes, then strained. *Niter kebbeh* along with *berbere* (chili powder) are the two essential flavorings of Ethiopian cookery and are used in most *wots* (stews) and vegetable dishes.

DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Long before recorded history, and, of course, the advent of refrigeration, the principal way to preserve very perishable butter was to remove the water and milk solids, a process called clarifying. The cooking process destroys bacteria and deactivates enzymes, while the elimination of the water prevents microbial growth, which keeps the butter from going rancid. It also lets the clarified butter reach higher temperatures without burning. Numerous cultures have developed methods of clarifying butter. European clarified butter, also called drawn butter and usually made from cow's milk, is heated for only a few minutes, then strained to eliminate most of the milk solids, without any significant cooking, keeping the flavor mild and leaving only pure liquid butter with a small amount of water. Both *samneh* (also called *samna* or *smen*), the Middle Eastern clarified butter, historically made from sheep or goat's milk, and Indian ghee (from the Sanskrit "bright"), frequently made from water buffalo butter, are cooked much longer and more slowly, eliminating more solids and water, enabling these butters to be stored for several months even without refrigeration. In fact, some people store *samneh* in a cool, dry place (traditionally in earthenware crocks) for several weeks or sometimes for more than a year, so that it can develop a characteristic fermented nutty aroma and flavor. A teaspoon of fermented *samneh* is generally sufficient to flavor dishes. Most Jews did not cook with the fermented type, preferring the milder version; in this book, the unfermented *samneh* is called for.