

Homemade Cream Cheese

Tastes so much better than store-bought, and it's easy to make

BY PAULA LAMBERT

Cream cheese is essential to the morning bagel ritual, and it fuels the passions of cheesecake lovers. But most people don't know that these favorite foods taste even better with homemade cream cheese. To my taste, supermarket cream cheese is rather bland and slippery; it's also firmed with gelatin, steered with stabilizers, and comes in an ugly, foil-wrapped rectangle. Homemade cream cheese has a rich, fresh-cream flavor and a refreshing tanginess, and it's made with just one main ingredient: whole milk. Despite its taste and its name, homemade cream cheese contains no added cream.

At my cheese factory, The Mozzarella Company, I make more than 20 kinds of cheese. Yet despite—or perhaps due to—its simplicity, cream cheese remains one of my favorite products. While I make 50 pounds of cream cheese every week, you can make a couple of pounds at home in very little time and with no special equipment.

CREAM CHEESE IS MILK WITH CULTURE

Milk needs two natural additives to become cream cheese: mesophilic culture, which is a bacteria that causes the milk to produce lactic acid; and vegetable rennet, which coagulates the acidic milk. Check the phone book for cheesemaking supply stores in your area, or see the mail-order sources on p. 43.

It takes two days to create a batch of cream cheese, but there's only a couple of hours of actual attention (mostly stirring the milk occasionally). Although there's nothing difficult about making cream cheese, it's important to follow the directions carefully. Even if you do everything correctly, cream cheese can be a capricious product. A quart of vitamin D milk may taste the same in California as it does in Florida, but the type of cows it came from and what they were fed can be very different, and these factors can affect cheesemaking. The most common side effect of these variations is that the



milk may fail to curd quickly. If you find this is a problem, try doubling the amount of rennet.

You can control two other important factors in cheesemaking—heat and cleanliness. Not only will accurate temperatures and clean equipment ensure your cheesemaking is a sanitary procedure, they're key to creating a successful batch. Use a thermometer, not guesswork; as few as 10 degrees over or under can make a difference.

FROM MILK TO CURD

Cream cheese begins when you heat milk, stirring often, in a stainless-steel or enamel-coated stockpot (see recipe on p. 42). Watch the heat carefully; milk scorches easily. When the milk reaches 165°F, immediately plunge the pot into a sink filled with

Testing the curds and whey. When the milk has properly curdled, the whey will rise to the top and the curd will be slightly resilient to the touch, like yogurt. It may take 24 hours or longer for this to happen, so be patient. Milks and cultures can vary, so curdling time varies, too.

FRESH CREAM CHEESE

Yields 1½ to 2 pounds.

1 gallon whole
homogenized milk
1 envelope mesophilic
culture
4 drops vegetable
rennet
½ cup cold water
Salt to taste

Don't break the curd.
Be gentle when transferring the curd to a fabric-lined colander to drain. You want the curd to remain as unbroken as possible; this will give you firmer, more flavorful cream cheese.

ice or very cold water. Stir the milk occasionally until it cools to 90°; this should take 20 to 25 minutes. Transfer the milk to a bowl.

Now it's time to inoculate the milk. Add one envelope of mesophilic culture. The package directions will say that the envelope cultures two gallons of milk; although my recipe calls for one gallon of milk, use the whole envelope anyway. Stir well for one minute. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and drape a towel over it. Allow the milk to sit undisturbed for 45 minutes to an hour at room temperature.

Dilute the vegetable rennet in half a cup of cold water and stir well. Add this mixture to the inoculated milk. Using a figure-8 pattern, stir the milk constantly for two minutes. The rennet is quite concentrated, so the dilution and stirring are very important to ensure the rennet is evenly distributed in the milk. Cover the container with plastic again and leave the milk in a warm spot (about 70°F), undisturbed, until the whey (a thin, yellowish liquid) rises and a curd forms (see photo on p. 41); this could take anywhere from 18 to 28 hours. When the milk is properly curdled, the curd will resemble white gelatin or yogurt and will be firm enough to hold its shape on a spoon. If this doesn't happen in the given time range, the milk has not coagulated enough. The room temperature may be too cool, or the cultures could be slow in acid development. In any case, don't worry: just wait a few more hours and try again.

FROM CURD TO CHEESE

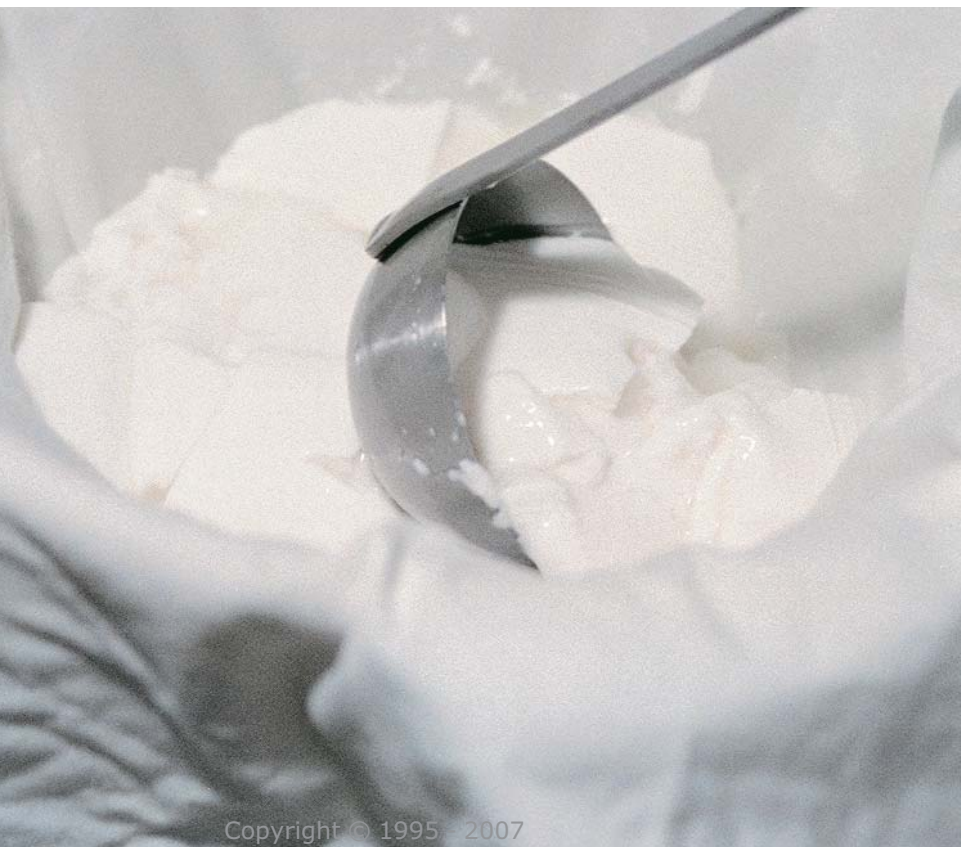
Once the curd has coagulated properly, use a ladle or a small bowl to carefully scoop the curd mass



into a colander lined with a double thickness of cheesecloth, a cotton pillowcase, or a linen towel (see photo at left.) Make sure the colander is over the sink to catch all the whey that will drain from the curd. If you want to save the high-protein whey for cooking or baking, set the colander over a large bowl. When transferring the curd, be careful to break it up as little as possible. If you shatter the curd, it will expel more whey, which makes for a drier and less flavorful cheese. Once all the curd is in the colander, fold the excess fabric over the curd, and set the colander in a large bowl. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and put it in the refrigerator for 24 hours. The cheese will continue to drain as it chills.

When you remove the cheese from the refrigerator, it's finished. Just turn the cheese into a clean bowl, stir it with a spoon, and add one or two teaspoons of salt, or more to taste. Remember, this won't look like store-bought cheese; it will be soft and appear a little curdled (see photo above). The cheese smooths easily with a little stirring.

You now have two pounds of homemade, ready-to-use cream cheese. While all the garden-variety uses for cream cheese will be better than ever (it's so good on bagels that you won't even want lox), try using your batch in cheesecakes, fruit tarts, vegetable dips, or in the following recipe for a three-layer *torta*. All these dishes put cream cheese in the spotlight—and when it's homemade, that's just where it ought to be.





Don't worry: home-made cream cheese should look a little curdled. After all the whey has drained away, your finished cheese will appear a little lumpy and feel soft to the touch. To make the cheese smooth, just give it a good stir.



Photo: Todd Bryant

CREAM CHEESE TORTA

This *torta* is ideal for parties. If you're planning an intimate gathering, the recipe is easily reduced to suit smaller molds. *Yields 4 to 5 cups, enough for a 1-quart mold; serves 20 or more as an appetizer.*

2 lb. fresh cream cheese
8-oz. jar sun-dried tomatoes in oil, drained
¼ cup basil pesto (see recipe at right)
8 to 10 very thin slices low-moisture mozzarella, provolone, Swiss, or Monterey Jack cheese
Toasted pine nuts (optional)

Divide the cream cheese into three equal parts and put them in separate bowls.

Put the sun-dried tomatoes in the work bowl of a food processor and process until smooth.

Stir the basil pesto into one part of the cream cheese until it's well mixed and the desired flavor is achieved. Into another part, stir about 2 Tbs. sun-dried tomato purée, or more to taste. (Any remaining purée can be put in a container, covered in oil, and refrigerated indefinitely.) Leave one part of the cream cheese plain.

Line a small mixing bowl or a terrine mold (4- to 5-cup capacity) with plastic wrap, leaving the excess wrap hanging over the edges. If you like, create a decorative pattern with the toasted pine nuts on the bottom of the lined bowl or mold. (You could also garnish the *torta* after it has been assembled.)

Spoon half of the tomato-flavored cream cheese into the bowl. Cover the cream cheese with a layer of the sliced cheese and press down gently to make it even and smooth. Then spoon half of the pesto-flavored cream cheese into the bowl. Add another layer of sliced cheese and press down gently. Follow that with half of the plain cream cheese. Add a final layer of sliced cheese and again press down gently. Repeat the layering process.

Fold the excess plastic wrap over the top of the *torta* and press down gently. Refrigerate for several hours, preferably overnight.

To unmold, open the plastic wrap, lay a serving plate over the bowl or mold, and invert. Carefully peel away the plastic wrap and decorate the *torta* with toasted pine nuts, if you like. Serve it with melba toast or water crackers.

BASIL PESTO:

Yields ¾ cup.

2 cups fresh basil leaves, lightly packed
½ cup walnuts
¼ cup olive oil
1 tsp. salt
1 clove garlic

Put all the ingredients in the work bowl of a food processor and process until the mixture has a fairly smooth consistency, about 1 min.

SOURCES FOR RENNET & MESOPHILIC CULTURE

The New England Cheesemaking Supply Company, 85-194 Main St., Ashfield, MA 01330-0085; 413/628-3808. Carries vegetable rennet and mesophilic culture.
Lehman's Hardware, PO Box 41, Kidron, OH 44636; 216/857-5757. Carries vegetable rennet and mesophilic culture.

Caprine Supply Co., PO Box Y, De Soto, KS 66018; 913/585-1191. Carries mesophilic culture.

Paula Lambert is the founder and owner of The Mozzarella Company in Dallas, where she makes a large line of award-winning cheeses. ♦

This three-layer cream cheese torta is always a hit on hors d'oeuvre platters. Alternating layers of plain, pesto, and sun-dried-tomato cream cheese are separated by thin slices of provolone or mozzarella. The flavors are at their peak if you make the torta just 24 hours ahead.