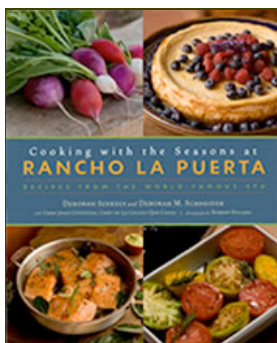


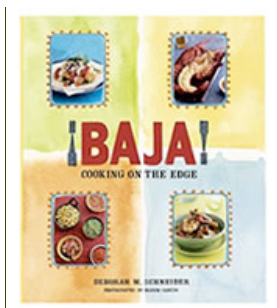
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Fresh Start

Creamy soft fresh cheeses are a cook's delight



I want a goat. This happens every year after the Fair, but lately, now that I've made a couple of simple, creamy-sweet fresh cheeses at home, this whole goat thing has become a minor obsession. Fresh cheese, after all, is easy to make; cheese is made from milk; and while milk can be had from all kinds of animals, from buffaloes to reindeer to zebras (probably even seal milk if you could figure out how to get it) goats are smaller than cows and cuter than sheep. You can probably guess where this is leading. She'd keep the lawn mowed, of course. The milking part might be challenging at first, but we'd work that out. Goats are smart—couldn't she be trained to do it herself? Would the neighbors even notice a goat?

After years on the dietary blacklist, castigated as a fat-laden bacterial playground, cheese is trendy again, but a whole class of cheeses is being overlooked. On the one hand you have your important ripened cheeses, plucked from caves and baskets, some frankly stinking; most with imposing foreign names in a bewildering complex of classifications by region and terroir, milks and rinds and molds and cures. Aged cheeses, like serious wines, can make the uninitiated feel both foolish and undeserving.

Fresh cheese is a completely different experience. This is cheese in its dewy youth, still sweetly unaffected by the travails of time, experience and bacteria. Fresh cheeses are creamy and mild-flavored, meant to be savored within hours or days of their creation. Common fresh cheeses include tender mozzarella, buttery mascarpone, elegant ricotta and fromage blanc, Neufchatel, crumbly queso fresco, quark, true cream cheese, and farmers' cheese. With some exceptions, notably mascarpone, most fresh cheeses are relatively low in fat.

Every cheese, even the most pretentious, begins life as a fresh cheese of some kind. If cheese is truly "milk's leap to immortality," as the saying goes, fresh cheese is that first baby step—mere dainty curds and whey, often only hours old when consumed. The very best fresh cheeses will still have a haunting savor of meadow grasses and flowers. Tasting these, one understands more clearly the motives of the spider, but not why Little Miss Muffet gave up so easily.

Making curds and whey is the first step in the more complicated process of making a hard cheese. Fresh milk is mostly water combined with rather small amounts of protein, fat and trace minerals and vitamins. When the chemical conditions for cheese making are right, the temperature is just so, the acid balance is correct, and the right bacteria are present--the proteins and fat in the milk can be coaxed to coagulate, or clump together to form curds, while the water in the milk separates out into a clear fluid called whey. (We've all made something that looks like this in the past, probably without meaning to; or found it lurking in the back of the refrigerator.) The curdled mass is poured into a cloth-lined sieve or mold and allowed to drain for the length of time needed to gain the desired consistency, from a few minutes to several hours, depending on the type. Et

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What's Next?



SOL Cocina brings the flavors and laid-back beach vibe of the Baja California coast to southern California.

Set on the Newport Marina, near Balboa Island, the 170-seat restaurant and bar is designed by Thomas Schoos to echo the expansive sea and sky of the Baja peninsula. [Read more...](#)

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voila! A fresh cheese.

If the cheesemaker is going to continue on to make a ripened cheese, the curds will be pressed and molded, then carefully cured at a controlled level of temperature and humidity for weeks or months—an art as well as an ancient science.

Remember--fresh cheese is all about freshness. Once you try making a simple fromage blanc recipe, store-bought ricotta will never be acceptable again. Bob Stonebrook, owner of The Aniata Cheese Company takes delivery of his fresh cheese twice weekly. Tasting a sample on a recent afternoon, he points out that even two days after it is made, the texture and taste of the Gioia (a Los Angeles mozzarella maker) fresh mozzarella has already begun to change. It is still wonderful, just not as freshly exquisite as when it is first made. Aniata also carries Gioia's delightful true ricotta cheese, made from the whey left over from the mozzarella process and sold when a few hours old, and a rarely seen treat known as burrata- tender fresh mozzarella around a creamy center. Needless to say, burrata sells out almost immediately. Stonebrook is looking forward to offering a true mozzarella di buffalo, made by a gentleman in Gardena who has his very own herd of water buffalo. Why am I so worried what the neighbors will think about one goat?

Buying, Use and Storage

For the most part, fresh cheeses are milk-sweet with a mild flavor that fairly begs to be enhanced with herbs or honey or fruit. Fresh goat cheeses will have a delicate, inoffensive air of goatiness and are light enough to be eaten as a dessert. The soft texture of fresh cheeses make perfect base for spreads and dips or canapés, or baking into tarts and cheesecakes.

If you are buying fresh cheeses, it's worth it to seek out quality brands at specialty stores, since these will have fewer additives and preservatives. Buy small quantities and be sure to check the expiration date on the package. Reseal tightly, since cheese quickly picks up off smells, and use within a day or so of opening.

Types of Fresh Cheeses

Ricotta- An Italian standard in recipes like lasagna, manicotti, a sweet cheese cake or cassata. Ricotta is made from the whey left after other cheeses are made, combined with a little whole milk. It looks like a fine-grained cottage cheese; it is faintly sweet.

Mascarpone: A triple-cream Italian cheese, made from cow's milk. Mascarpone is a melt-in your mouth buttery treat, ridiculously high in fat, with a texture like that of sour cream. Mascarpone is mostly used in desserts such as tiramisu, cannoli and gelatos.

Cream Cheese and Neufchatel: Spreadable, very creamy cow's milk cheeses with a high percentage of butterfat; Neufchatel having slightly less. Most commercial cream cheese has many additives. Freshly made cream cheese is an unforgettable treat.

Farmer's Cheese, Pot Cheese, Queso Blanco, Queso Fresco, or Fromage Blanc:

The very simplest of cheeses (see the recipe below) whose final use depends on how much moisture is pressed out of the curds before it is used. Farmer's cheese tends to be dry and crumbly; fromage blanc and pot cheese are quite moist, while the Mexican versions (blanco and fresco) are lightly salted.

Cottage Cheese: Simple curds, briefly drained and then mixed with a little heavy cream. Made to be eaten fresh, with honey, fruit or other flavorings.

Quark: A tangy fresh cheese made from buttermilk, which can be used as a sour cream substitute.

Labna: The name given to heavy, whole milk yogurt which has been drained of excess liquid until it forms a soft, spreadable rich consistency. Labna can be spread on a dish, sprinkled with herbs and fruity olive oil and eaten like a dip. In the Middle East it is frequently flavored with herbs, rolled into small balls and preserved in olive oil, or dried and crumbled into food.

Mozzarella: Traditional Mozzarella is a water buffalo cheese, though the vast majority today is made of cow's milk. Its distinct rubbery, stringy character comes from the cheese-making process, when the curds are stretched and folded back upon themselves in hot water until they form long strands. The fresh cheese is formed into balls of various sizes and held in light brine. Fresh mozzarella is as delicate and melting as the commercial versions are rubbery and tough.

Simple Homeade Cheese

It may be true that we are the most domestically challenged culture since the first fish flopped onto land and thought about redecorating, but fresh cheese is so easy to make that I would encourage anyone to try it, regardless of skill level. The first time I made fresh cheese, I didn't even have to leave the house for ingredients, and it took less than a half hour to make. The result was a lovely, creamy mass which could be called ricotta, queso blanco or fromage blanc; the freshness of the cheese gives a certain delicacy and

fresh taste to the recipes. Fresh cheese is really no cheaper than store-bought, but the finished product is infinitely superior.

The process is a breeze. All you need are a few lengths of cheesecloth, an instant-read probe-type thermometer (preferably Taylor, which is adjustable,) a bowl and colander, and a heavy-bottomed 6-quart pot.

BASIC FRESH CHEESE

(Pot Cheese, Fromage Blanc or Queso Blanco)

This is the simplest cheese ever. Use in the Sweet Crepes with Fromage Blanc, or the Eggplant Cannelloni, or savor a bit with fresh fruit and a drizzle of honey. Makes 3 cups.

1 gallon whole milk
1/4 cup white vinegar

Heat the milk over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until it reaches 180 degrees (or until bubbles appear around the edges of the milk and it seems on the verge of boiling; but do not boil.) Remove from heat and stir while you add the white vinegar. Stir occasionally for the next 20 minutes. Set the sieve over a large bowl. Unfold the cheesecloth and cut into squares large enough to hang over the edges of the sieve; line the sieve with at least four single layers of cheesecloth.

carefully pour the curds and whey from the pot into the sieve and allow to drain for 30 minutes. Fold the inner layers of cheesecloth over the curd then tie the four corners of the outer layer together, and suspend the cheese from a dowel or spoon handle so it can drip freely. Chill. The cheese is ready when it stops dripping (about 5 hours) but the flavor improves the next day. (I do not add any salt at this point.) Use in any recipe calling for ricotta, queso blanco, pot cheese or fromage blanc. The nutritious whey can be used in soups.

To make a dry, crumbly farmer's cheese, line a perforated mold with a layer of cheesecloth. Pack the mold with the drained curds and press with a 'follower' and a two-pound weight.

OVERNIGHT FRESH GOAT CHEESE

Because no culture is added, this soft cheese has a very delicate goat flavor. Use in Goat Cheese Tart or Herbed Spread. Goat milk is available at Henry's or Whole Foods. Makes about 2 cups (16 ounces.)

2 quarts goat milk
2 cups buttermilk
3/8 teaspoon liquid **rennet*** mixed with 2 tablespoons cold water

In a large stainless steel pan, with a heavy bottom or on a simmer pad, combine the goat's milk and buttermilk. Add the diluted rennet, and combine thoroughly with a whisk. Heat over medium-low heat without stirring until an instant-read thermometer reads exactly 180 degrees; do not break up the large curd. Remove from heat and cover with a clean towel. Let stand overnight. Line a sieve or colander with several layers of cheesecloth and carefully pour the curds into the sieve. Fold the cheesecloth over the top and let drain in the refrigerator for several hours, or overnight.

Cheesemaking Resources

Fresh cheeses are remarkably undemanding, quick and simple to make at home. You cannot use ultra-pasteurized milk, but otherwise supermarket milk performs very well. Some cheesemakers swear by reconstituted dry milk.

You can use common kitchen equipment for cheese making, but some supplies are quite specialized. **Vegetable rennet** can be purchased at Whole Foods, La Jolla, but it doesn't work as reliably as **animal rennet**. Best source for animal rennet and real cheesecloth is New England Cheesemaking Supply Company at **(413)628-3808** or on-line at www.cheesemaking.com.

If you decide to get really serious, Ricki Carroll, the owner of New England Cheesemaking Supply has written an excellent book called, appropriately, Home Cheese Making (Storey Books, \$16.95.)

Down to Earth

Region restaurant takes the hands-on approach to cheese making



At Region restaurant in Hillcrest, the feel is 21st century rustic but in the kitchen, a

back-to-the-roots cooking revolution is bubbling away. "I want to make everything from scratch," says pastry chef Jack Fisher. "Prosciutto. Aged cheeses." Fisher, casual in a sugar-crust blue canvas apron, t-shirt and ringing cell phone, was preparing to make fresh mozzarella for the evening service while calmly instructing Denasio, a cook on loan from George's at the Cove, in the finer points of caramel ice cream and Meyer lemon semifreddo. For a guy who specializes in the sweetly ethereal, Jack Fisher takes a hands-on approach to his cooking philosophy.

Fisher makes fresh mozzarella every day, and serves it drizzled with fruity olive oil on a simple appetizer plate with olives, prosciutto and crostini. It sells out nightly. At a recent dinner, the creamy/crumby texture of a fresh ricotta –also house made–accented a plate of sautéed greens with fresh pasta.

Why would busy chefs bother making their own fresh cheeses? Fisher (along with partners Michael Stebner and Allyson Colwell) cite as their inspiration atelier / restaurants like Artisan, in New York, and Paul Bertolli's Oliveto in the Bay Area, where limited-production, hand-made artisan foods are showcased and the chefs craft, and even grow, much of what they serve. In the 1970's and 1980s Chez Panisse and chef Alice Waters did something similar, re-inventing a style of simple, hand-made, rustic food that also managed to be terribly chic. This atelier philosophy has fueled microbrewery beers, boutique wineries and the long-awaited return of decent bread. And now, cheese. Because in San Diego, having hand-made local product means, for the most part, making it yourself.

Fisher's tender fresh mozzarella and creamy, dreamy ricotta are both made from off-the-shelf cow's milk. In the mozzarella, he uses two natural additives, citric acid and lipase powder (see Resources), which take the place of the natural enzymes that would occur during the ripening process in fresh, unpasteurized, unrefrigerated milk that is several hours old. Fat chance of finding that in San Diego, though Fisher thinks it might be a good idea to park a cow on the patio as a kind of mascot.

Fisher pulls out a couple of gallons of pasteurized whole milk. "Any brand will do," he says, "as long as it's not ultra-pasteurized." (heat-treated to beyond 180 degrees.) He empties the milk into a well-used heavy pot, casually stabbing the bottoms of the milk jugs with a huge knife in order to speed the glugging milk along, with the air of a man who has poured massive amounts of dairy products in his day.

Making the mozzarella is surprisingly quick and simple. Cold milk is combined with the citric acid and lipase and heated over a moderate flame, while a crushed rennet tablet dissolves slowly in spring water. At exactly 88 degrees (tested with an accurate instant-read thermometer) Fisher stirs in the dissolved rennet. A few seconds later, fueled by heat and the coagulant, the milk suddenly blooms into clouds of rubbery, pure white curd suspended in whey: newborn mozzarella. He skims the curd into china bowls, and heads for the microwave.

This is where the fun begins. (I have to confess that more than half the fun of being a chef is playing with food all day long.) Fisher dons latex gloves to protect his hands, works a sprinkling of fine sea salt into the curd and zaps it for a full minute on high power. Working quickly, he presses the hot curd into a ball, squeezing out as much liquid as possible, and folds the curd back upon itself. The process of heating, squeezing, kneading and folding is repeated again and again. Each time, the texture of the cheese changes: from cottage cheesy lumps to rubbery mass to a firm, smooth ball. While he works, the temperature of the cheese feels like uncomfortably hot bath water.

After five or six passes through the microwave/kneading process, the finished cheese is a supple wave of pure white with a smooth, waxy sheen. Fisher gives it one last fold and drops it into the bowl; it looks (really) like a gigantic wad of chewing gum.

The finished cheese is divided and shaped into smooth balls with a practiced twirling motion which Fisher attributes to years of making sugar swans, and the finished cheese is plopped back into the whey to cool.

The entire production, takes about 30 minutes and yields about 2 ½ pounds of melt-in-your-mouth perfection, firm yet tender, with the sweet floral taste of fresh milk. I ask him how else his fresh mozzarella can be served, but Fisher demurs; he likes his cheese au naturel. "I'm just waiting for tomato season," he says with a grin.

Region's Fresh Mozzarella

Jack Fisher adapted his recipe and technique from Home Cheese Making by Ricki Carroll, owner of New England Cheesemaking Supply and muse to a generation of cheese makers (see Resources.) Aspiring cheese makers are well advised to buy the book for cheese making basics and invaluable tips. A properly calibrated Taylor (adjustable) instant-read thermometer is essential for this recipe, since the rennet is very sensitive.

2 gallons whole pasteurized milk (not ultra-pasteurized)

3 teaspoons citric acid*
 Heaping ½ teaspoon Lipase 3 powder*
 ½ rennet tablet*, crushed and dissolved in ½ cup spring water
 ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
 *see Resources

Pour cold milk into a three-gallon, heavy bottomed pot. Add citric acid and lipase powder and stir thoroughly; small lumps will form. Heat over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until the milk reaches exactly 88 degrees. Stir in the dissolved rennet and keep stirring as the curds form and the temperature climbs to exactly 105 degrees. This happens quickly, keep stirring gently. Turn off heat. When the curds and whey are separated, turn off the heat and skim the curds with a fine skimmer into two microwave-proof bowls. Reserve the whey.

Put on latex or rubber gloves. Press as much liquid as possible out of the curds, draining it off, and work the sea salt well into the curds. Microwave on high for 60 seconds. Quickly press the curds down to force out more liquid, and squish and knead the curd into a rough ball. Microwave again for twenty seconds or a little more, and repeat the process; knead by flattening out the mass and then folding it back on top of itself several times. (Fisher worked the mass of curds in his hands, using both thumbs to flatten it out, but you could knead it in the bowl or on a counter top.) Repeat the heating, pressing, draining and kneading process five or six times without allowing the cheese to cool; the curds must be uncomfortably hot but still bearable to the touch. The cheese is done when it is smooth, bouncy and shiny, and the outside stretches into strands when it is folded.

Transfer whey into a storage container. Form the cheese into balls of the desired size and drop back into the whey. Cool with a piece of plastic wrap pressed onto the surface of the whey, and refrigerate until needed. Bring to room temperature before serving. Keeps 2-3 days, refrigerated, though it is at its best eaten immediately.

Resources:

New England Cheese Making Supply Company www.cheesemaking.com Or call (413)628-3808
 Home Cheese Making, Third Edition by Ricki Carroll, Storey Books
 Cooking by Hand, Paul Bertolli, Clarkson Potter

Fresh Goat Cheese Tart with Oven-Roasted Tomato Petals and Arugula Salad

This recipe, adapted from a classic Julia Child recipe, produces a very rich, savory cheese tart with a creamy texture set off by a salad of bracing, peppery arugula and tomatoes warmed in virgin olive oil. This would be an excellent light lunch or a first course for a substantial dinner. Makes one 8-inch tart (10-12 slices.)

Filling:

1 cup soft goat's cheese, fresh (see Overnight Goat Cheese) or purchased
 5 ounces good-quality cream cheese, softened
 ¼ cup heavy cream
 2 tablespoons butter, softened
 2 eggs, beaten
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 ¼ teaspoon cayenne
 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves, finely chopped
 1 recipe pie crust
 Oven Roasted Tomato Petals (below)

Make pie crust and refrigerate for 20 minutes. Roll out to 1/8th inch thickness and line an eight-inch tart ring or pie pan with the dough. Patch any holes with excess dough, and refrigerate for 20 minutes. While the dough is resting, preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Line the dough with a sheet of foil, pressing it gently into the corners and fill the foil liner with rice or beans. Bake for 10 minutes, then remove the foil and beans, and bake a further 5 minutes or until lightly browned. Remove from the oven.

While the shell is baking, make the filling: In a food processor combine the goat cheese, cream cheese and softened butter. Pulse to blend, scraping the sides down often. With the motor running, add the cream and the eggs, salt, pepper and cayenne. When thoroughly combined, stir in the fresh thyme. Pour the filling into the pre-baked pie shell and bake for 20-25 minutes, or until it is gently puffed and beginning to brown. Cool on a rack; serve at room temperature with a couple of Tomato Petals and a little pile of Arugula Salad.

Oven Roasted Tomato Petals

4 roma tomatoes
 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
 Pinch kosher salt

Pour boiling water over the tomatoes and let stand one minute. Peel off the skin and remove the stem. Cut each tomato lengthwise into quarters and cut away the seedy cores; you will wind up with 16 long, pointed 'petals.' Toss the tomatoes with the olive oil and salt and bake in an ovenproof dish alongside the tart for five minutes only. Remove from the oven and allow to cool; drizzle the pan juices over the tomatoes.

Arugula Salad

1 pound arugula, stems removed, washed, spun dry and chilled
 Pinch kosher salt
 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
 1 1/2 tablespoons good wine vinegar or red wine (such as a Syrah)

Just before serving, toss the arugula with the olive oil, then the vinegar or wine. Taste a leaf, and adjust the balance of flavors with a few drops more oil, vinegar or wine.

Herb and Garlic Cheese Spread

Serve in a bowl surrounded by baguette and crackers. The spread is very potent when first made, but mellows beautifully in a day or two.

Makes about 2 cups.

1 pound goat cheese, homemade (see Overnight Fresh Goat Cheese) or purchased
 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
 2 tablespoons cognac, brandy or armagnac
 1 teaspoon sea salt or kosher salt
 2 cloves of fresh garlic, peeled
 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 2 teaspoons mixed fresh herbs, finely chopped (thyme, tarragon, chervil, chives) or 1 teaspoon dried herbes de Provence, ground to a powder

In the bowl of a food processor, combine the cheese, olive oil and cognac, and process until smooth and creamy. Chop the garlic to a paste with the salt, and add to the cheese along with the pepper; process a further minute and taste for seasoning. (People have been known to add more cognac.) Add the herbs and pulse to blend. Pack into a container and allow the flavors to mellow for up to three days.

Sweet Crepes au Fromage Blanc with Fresh Fruit Sauce

You can call them blintzes if you like; I think Crepes au Fromage Blanc is much more elegant. If you have never made crepes before, you'll be amazed at how easy and fast they are to crank out, and infinitely tastier than anything you can buy. Make and fill a day ahead and pop into the oven at the last minute for brunch or dessert. Makes 18-20 filled crepes.

1 recipe Crepes (below)
 2 tablespoons melted butter
 1 1/2 cups Basic Fresh Cheese (recipe follows)
 3 ounces good quality Cream Cheese
 1/3 cup white sugar
 1 teaspoon fresh lemon juice, or 1/2 teaspoon lemon or orange zest
 1/4 teaspoon vanilla extract
 1/4 teaspoon salt
 1 egg plus 1 egg yolk
 Optional: 1/2 cup Golden Raisins soaked in hot water, dark rum or Grand Marnier
 Powdered sugar

Make the crepe batter: Combine 1 cup water, 1 cup milk, 2 cups of flour and four eggs in a blender jar. Blend on high speed for one minute. Add 1/4 teaspoon of salt and the melted butter. Scrape down the sides with a spatula and blend again for 30 seconds. Chill for at least 1 hour. (The batter should be the consistency of light cream; add a small amount of water to thin if necessary.)

To cook the crepes: Choose an eight-inch non-stick pan and heat over medium high heat until a drop of water dances in the pan. Brush with a very small amount of melted butter. Use a half-filled 1/4 cup measure to pour the batter into the pan; you will need 2-3 tablespoons per crepe, depending on the thickness of the batter. Pour the batter into the hot pan and quickly swirl the pan to coat the bottom. Return to the heat. When the edges are lightly browned and the crepe is puffing, use a rubber spatula to lift the edge; quickly grab it and turn it over. Cook for a minute more, then slide onto a plate. Continue until all the batter is used up. You will want to adjust the heat so the crepe cooks quickly; if the pan is smoking, it is too hot. Brush with a very small amount of butter every few crepes.

Make the filling: In a food processor combine the ricotta and cream cheese and process until well combined, scraping down the sides and corners with a spatula. Add the sugar, juice or zest, vanilla and salt and process until well mixed; add the eggs with the motor running. If you are using the optional raisins, drain well, pat dry and stir into the filling mixture with a spoon.

Place two heaping tablespoons (about an eighth of a cup) of filling in the middle of each crepe and either roll into a cylinder, with the ends tucked neatly under, or fold the four sides over to make a square. Set into a buttered baking dish, barely touching, and bake at 350 degrees for 15 minutes. Dust with powdered sugar and serve hot with Fresh Fruit Sauce.

Fresh Fruit Sauce

1 pint raspberries, sliced strawberries or blackberries (fresh or frozen)
 ¼ cup to ½ cup powdered sugar, sifted
 2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

Combine the fruit, the smaller amount of powdered sugar and the lemon juice in a non-reactive bowl. Let stand, covered, for one hour. Taste and add more sugar if necessary to sweeten or thicken the sauce.

Yogurt Cheese with Lemon, Mint, Olive Oil and Olives

Called labna, fresh yogurt cheese is a common meze or snack throughout the Middle East, Greece and Turkey. It is often presented with warm pita bread and a bowl of green or black Mediterranean olives. Make your own yogurt for this, or buy a good quality whole-milk yogurt such as Pavels' or Strauss. Makes about 20 one-inch balls.

1 32-ounce container plain Balkan style yogurt (not low-fat)
 Juice and fine zest of 1 lemon
 1 ½ teaspoons kosher salt
 2 tablespoons fresh mint, chopped
 1 teaspoon fresh thyme, chopped
 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Combine all ingredients. Pour the mixture into a colander lined with several layers of cheesecloth. Tie the corners of the cheesecloth firmly to make a bag. Suspend the bag from a dowel or spoon handle over a bowl to catch drips. Let the yogurt drain for 48 hours, refrigerated. Roll the labna into small balls, or spread on a plate and drizzle generously with good extra-virgin olive oil. Serve with bread or pitas for dipping.

Grilled Eggplant 'Cannelloni' with Sundried Tomato Sauce

Pasta-less rolls of thinly sliced eggplant filled with light, tender fresh ricotta cheese, fresh spinach and a little nutty Parmesan. Eggplant loves being grilled; it develops a wonderful smoky taste and chic grill marks, while using a fraction of the oil it would take to fry it. If you don't have a grill, cook the eggplant under a very hot broiler. Richly flavored sun dried tomatoes bring the taste of summer to a midwinter marinara. Serves 8.

For the Eggplant Cannelloni

2 large eggplants
 1/3 good olive oil
 Kosher salt
 Filling
 1 tablespoon olive oil
 1/3 cup onion, finely chopped
 2 cloves garlic finely chopped
 1 bunch spinach, stemmed, washed and roughly chopped
 2 cups Basic Fresh Cheese or ricotta cheese (12 ounces)
 2 eggs
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 Scant 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg
 ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese (divided use)

Wash and dry the eggplants. Slice off the leafy top and a sliver of the round bottom, so it stands without rocking. Use a sharp knife to carefully cut the eggplants from top to bottom into even slices, about a quarter of an inch thick. Preheat the grill. Lightly brush the slices with olive oil on both sides and grill over a hot fire, turning once, until the surfaces are well-browned and the eggplant is quite soft, but not falling apart. Salt very lightly and stack until ready to use. (Can be made ahead.)

For the filling: Heat the oil in a frying pan and cook the onion and garlic over medium heat until soft, but not brown. Add the spinach, increase heat to medium-high and cook, stirring, until it is wilted and the pan is dry. Remove from the heat. In a bowl thoroughly

combine the ricotta, eggs, salt, pepper, nutmeg and half of the parmesan cheese; a potato masher is a good tool for this job. When the cheese mixture is well-combined, add the cooled spinach and stir together.

To fill the Cannelloni: place a heaping spoonful of the filling on the smaller end of an eggplant slice, and roll up firmly. Set the rolls in an oiled baking dish, tucked close together. Spoon Sun Dried Tomato Sauce generously over the dish, sprinkle with the remaining parmesan and bake at 375 degrees for 15-20 minutes, or until very hot. Serve with more of the sauce.

Sun Dried Tomato Sauce

1 tablespoon olive oil
2 tablespoons very finely chopped onion
1 garlic clove, peeled and finely chopped
1 cup sun dried tomatoes
1 1/2 cups water
1/8 teaspoon salt (or to taste)
1/8 teaspoon sugar
14-ounce can good quality plum tomatoes in juice
2 sprigs fresh basil, stemmed and chopped

Heat the oil and cook the onions and garlic until soft, but not brown. Add the water and sundried tomatoes, salt and sugar and simmer for 15 minutes, or until the tomatoes are very soft. Add the canned tomatoes and simmer a further 15 minutes. Allow to cool slightly and pulse the sauce in a food processor or blender until fairly smooth, or pass through a food mill. The sauce can be served as is, or forced through a coarse sieve. Taste for salt. Stir in the basil immediately before serving.

Café Au Lait Mascarpone Gelato

Sinfully rich; even better with dark chocolate sauce drizzled over, and some chopped nuts on top. Serves 8.

2 cups heavy cream
3 egg yolks
1/2 cup sugar
1 1/2 cups mascarpone cheese, beaten
1/2 cup triple-strength espresso

Beat the egg yolks and sugar together until the sugar is dissolved. Heat the cream until bubbles form around the edge; remove from heat. Whisk the cream into the yolks, then cook in a double-boiler (or a bowl set over a pan of simmering water) until the foam disappears and the mixture has thickened slightly. Do not boil. Stir in the espresso and chill completely. When chilled, whip in the mascarpone and freeze according to machine directions. Transfer to an airtight container and freeze until hard. Let soften slightly before serving.

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