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FOOD

Better Butter



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An intentional and elusive sourness heightens butter's natural sweetness -- and makes it worthy of being the featured rather than the supporting player

by [Corby Kummer](#)

I RECENTLY silenced a room full of experts on diet and health by asking if it was time to rethink butter. The scientists at the meeting, which was organized by the Harvard School of Public Health and Oldways, a kind of nutrition brain trust, had seemed to be on the verge of giving the nod to butter. They were saying that synthesized "trans-fat," which is in stick margarine, is no better for the heart than saturated fat, the main kind in butter. They were saying that the high levels of fat in our current diets need not invariably lead to bad health and obesity -- so long as we exercise, eat less food in general, and make sure the fats we eat are the right kinds. Why not butter? I wondered. It's genuine and unadulterated, and most people love it. I was never a butter-lover myself (except when it came to cookies). Given the dull sameness of most brands, it hardly seemed worth the calories, let alone the health risks, to spread butter on bread. In the past year or two, though, I have tasted butter with far more flavor than I thought possible. The analogy to olive oil seems obvious. When it became clear that mono-unsaturated fats, the main

kind in olive oil (especially extra-virgin oil), were the least risky for the heart and possibly of help in preventing cancer, gourmet markets and restaurants started selling and using just-harvested oils. These showed the peppery, fresh flavors that olive oil could have. Soon there was a competition to see who could offer the fanciest bottle of oil just out of the press. Recently the same markets have begun stocking butters with beautiful silver and gold labels. These show what full, tangy, rounded flavor butter can have.

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The experts' resounding silence made clear that they were not about to change their stance: mono-unsaturated fat is still the fat to have if you're having fat. I was undeterred. During a fruit break several researchers and nutrition activists admitted in private conversation to being impassioned connoisseurs of chocolate and ice cream. Their excuse was that the fats that cause real problems are rarely the ones people deliberately add to what they eat, or even think much about. That is, you're less likely to ruin your health with the expensive imported Normandy butter you spread on a fresh baguette than with the melted "real butter" doused on movie-theater popcorn, let alone the oil in fast-food french fries. (And don't think that the new fake-fat potato chips will help your health: the long-term effects of losses of fat-soluble nutrients, which consuming Olestra can cause, are unknown and potentially troubling.)

I did not win the scientists' blessing for butter. But they did wholeheartedly endorse buying and eating the freshest food possible, whatever the food. If I still had to restrict my allotment, all the more reason to learn why some kinds of butter taste so much better than others -- that is, when you pay attention to the taste.

MOST butter has little to no flavor, and cooks and bakers like it that way. They prize its ability to be a sounding board, to enhance and magnify other flavors while adding only a slight creamy taste of its own. The qualities they look for are freshness and neutrality. Bakers want a firm plasticity, which gives their cakes and especially pastries superior texture. In recent years the vogue has been for higher-fat butters: bakers who can afford it buy [Plugrá](#), whose name comes from the French for "more fat," or Eclairé. American standards call for butter to contain a minimum of 80 percent butterfat. Even if one or two percent more fat sounds like a small difference, premium butters "perform" better in sauté pans and mixing bowls, and on the palate they can have a more mouth-coating,

satiny feel.

But my search was for flavor, not performance, and flavor comes from cream and how it is treated -- matters with which, surprisingly, most cooks and bakers are little concerned. Plugrá and its imitators, and also Land O Lakes, still the baker's gold standard, are sweet-cream butters. The name has a nice sound, but sweet-cream butters are bland at best. The revelation of my research was that butter can actually have a distinct -- and desirable -- flavor of its own. That flavor comes from allowing the cream it is made from to sour ever so slightly.

This intentional fermentation is quite different from what causes the flavors cooks object to. It's very hard to taste any kind of butter at its best, because of the numerous possible storage mishaps between the dairy and the kitchen. Butter works as a sounding board not just for mushrooms and shallots in the sauté pan but also for onion and broccoli in the refrigerator. Furthermore, butter-makers often add heavy doses of salt, partly to compensate for blandness and chiefly to add shelf life. During the months before the official sell-by date, however, butter can begin to turn rancid, especially if storage conditions are less than ideal. Most people's experience of butter flavor, then, is salt, slight rancidity, and whatever else is in the refrigerator.

You can make sweet-cream butter at home that will avoid these problems, and if you have ever let your attention wander while whipping cream, you have probably made butter already. It takes only seconds for cream to turn from a suspension of fat globules in water to a suspension of water in fat. Perfectly fresh butter gives you the chance to taste what sweet-cream butter should be, without the overwhelming salt of salted butter or the off-flavors of so much store-bought butter.

Even pristine homemade butter, though, is unlikely to lead to the kind of conversion I underwent. The chief reason is that it is almost impossible to buy cream -- the one thing you need to make butter -- that has any taste. Commercial dairies heat cream to a very high temperature, or "ultra-heat-treat" it, so that it will last for weeks without souring. This is calamitous for flavor. The many strains of good bacteria that can give interest and depth are wiped out in the process, along with the handful of bad bacteria that cause spoilage or disease. This is why artisans concerned about the taste of their butter inoculate the cream with

specially selected strains of bacteria.

Not all flavor need be wiped out when milk or cream is pasteurized. Measures short of induced souring can greatly improve the taste of milk or cream. The first rule is not to blast it to blandness. Ultra-heat treatment is just the worst - - if easy and ubiquitous -- choice for cream. [Straus Family Creamery](#), in the gorgeous hills of Marin County, chooses not to introduce bacteria into the organically produced cream it uses, pasteurizing the cream at a lower-than-usual temperature to make fresh-tasting sweet-cream butter. It immediately freezes and ships the butter to several western states (and anywhere customers are willing to pay the freight; you can order it on the Web at strausmilk.com).

Despite what propaganda for the "Mediterranean diet" would lead you to believe, countries along that sea still cook with plenty of butter. On Sardinia, for example, butter is nearly as important a cooking medium as lard and olive oil. The island's top-selling butter is made with sweet cream by Latte Arborea, a dairy built in the 1920s on a formerly malarial Sardinian swamp. The Fascist regime named the built-from-scratch town Mussolinia; now it is the pastoral Arborea. When I toured the dairy not long ago, the sophisticated woman accompanying me told our guide that as far as she was concerned, the Arborea butter she knew from the supermarket might as well be wax. Then she tasted butter fresh out of the churn, before it was even packaged. Her eyes widened at its unexpectedly nutty, pure flavor, and her face reddened at her frankness seconds before.

AS my friend's surprise illustrated, the delicate perfume of sweet-cream butter is fugitive. Even with immediate freezing and careful shipping, some of the volatile aromas are forever lost. Only culture can bring lasting greatness. I mean bacterial culture. Bacteria give butter a rounded, full flavor -- they "mature" cream, so that the butter-maker churns the equivalent of the French crème fraîche, or very lightly soured cream. The subtle, milky, barely tangy flavor heightens butter's natural sweetness, and gives cultured butter far more interest than sweet-cream butter ever has.

Before industrialization, farmhouse butter was almost always made with matured cream. While the cream was stored until there was enough to churn and the time to churn it, it naturally developed flavor from bacteria in the air. Sweet-cream butter is largely a postwar phenomenon,

a result of the rise of industrial dairies, which can churn cream as soon as it is separated from milk.

Today an artisan has to take careful, expensively slow steps to ensure that cream has flavor. My favorite American buttermaker is Jonathan White, of [Egg Farm Dairy](#) (800-273-2637), in Peekskill, New York, whose slogan is "Setting the dairy industry back 100 years." Like the Straus family on the opposite side of the country, White slowly heats batches of cream to a far lower temperature than usual, thus avoiding the inert cooked-milk taste of ordinary cream. The method he uses, "vat pasteurization," fell out of favor after the Second World War, as continuous processes replaced batch processes throughout the food industry -- among the many modern miracles that have effectively obliterated the individual and nuanced flavors of handmade food. (White heads the American branch of [Slow Food](#), an Italian organization that advocates returning to traditional methods.)

The next step is the crucial one on the backward road that White's motto dictates: he deliberately introduces a carefully selected bacterial strain. Near the end of the butter-making process one day at his dairy I peered into his 1950s-vintage cast-aluminum churn, which looks something like a wringer washing machine and requires as much maintenance, White told me, as a sports car of the same era. I could see what looked like cream-colored stalactites adhering to the big horizontal metal paddles. The nutty, popcornlike smell was nearly overpowering, and the taste of the butter I took from my (carefully cleansed) finger was powerfully tangy.

This churned crème fraîche is not what White sells. He can't. The full force of the acids and enzymes would oxidize the butter within a day. So he does what most butter-makers do -- "washes" the butter, by running ice-cold water through the churn. This rinses away much of the acids and enzymes, and also consolidates the mass, turning it from stalactites to ivory folds that look like confectioner's-sugar icing. (Makers of salted butter then add salt crystals or brine.) White serves tubs of what he calls unwashed butter at a newly expanded store at Egg Farm Dairy, an hour's drive from New York City.

The rinse water is discarded -- and so, to White's understandable dismay, is most of the liquid of the kind that drained out of the churn just before I put my finger in. This is true buttermilk, which White claims is a miraculous

substance. It comes only from cultured, not sweet, cream. Buttermilk from sweet-cream butter is as sweet as regular milk, as I discovered when I tasted Straus buttermilk from uncultured butter; it lacks the bacteria that produce lactic acid and give true buttermilk its marvelous tartness. Today's commercial buttermilk is not the residue of butter-making of any sort but simply cultured skim or lowfat milk. It lacks true buttermilk's lecithin, which binds many ingredients and gives a smooth texture to pancakes, muffins, biscuits, frozen baked goods, and ice milk.

Buttermilk is virtually without fat and is deliciously refreshing. Although White now donates or throws away most of his buttermilk, he plans to create a demand for it, and jokes that one day he will produce butter merely as a by-product. A like-minded dairy owner, Bunny Flint, also hopes to sell the buttermilk from her cultured Organic Cow butter, made in Vermont from organically produced cream (telephone 800-769-9693).

The consistency of butter greatly affects the perception of taste, which I think helped to account for the popularity of Celles sur Belle -- a butter with a relatively airy texture, made near Cognac -- at a tasting of eleven butters I assembled at my office. I grew up on Breakstone whipped sweet butter, which is aerated as it is packed. Egg Farm Dairy uses Rube Goldberg-like contraptions to pack its butter without compressing it; White wants a slightly mealy texture, which he says would cost him points on a U.S. Department of Agriculture grading test. The way cream is chilled and how it is churned and washed also affect consistency, as does the final fat content. Plugrá, for instance, with its two extra percentage points of butterfat, is smoother and more plastic than other butters. White's butter is 86 percent fat, and makes beautiful puff pastry.

Yes, this is a lot of fat. But oil is 100 percent fat. And when something has real flavor, it takes only a small amount to satisfy you. As my nutritionist guides would readily agree, if you can eat only a little bit of something, it might as well be the very best.

BY far the most inviting-looking butter I encountered in my research was also the one I think I would choose in any blind tasting of well-kept butters: Burro Occelli, made in creameries in the pre-Alpine mountains near the border between Italy and Austria and packaged in the Piedmont hills near Alba, the world capital of white truffles. In the early 1970s Giuseppe Occelli left the electrical-

engineering career for which he had trained to revive the cheese-making tradition he saw being abandoned in villages all around him. His cheeses have won him admiration throughout Italy, but he began with butter. Over twenty years Occelli perfected his processes of slow pasteurization and culturing, and built relationships with mountainside farmers whose cream he would buy depending on the season and what and where the cows had eaten.

This carefully built system came to an end with European Union regulations, which require unpasteurized cream to be transported at much lower temperatures than previous laws required. At these near-freezing temperatures certain bacteria specialized for very low temperatures produce flavors that Occelli finds unacceptable. Unwilling to use cream from closer, lower-altitude herds, Occelli realized that he would have to show the mountainside dairies from which he bought cream how to make butter on the spot. As if giving up a son, he told me, Occelli revealed his long-studied methods to two technicians, who regularly travel to several tiny pre-Alpine creameries to help with the production of butter from freshly separated cream. He buys and packages the finished butter.

One final piece of tradition Occelli refuses to abandon, and his refusal has cost him dearly. When he was starting out, he found several hand-cut wooden butter molds in a Turin dairy-supply shop, whose owner gave them to him in the hope that he would put them back into service. A raised cow and deeply scalloped edges became a kind of trademark, one whose handmade look helped to persuade cooks that Occelli's was worth twice the price of ordinary butter. To continue using the original molds (and the reproductions he commissioned) while remaining within EU law, Occelli had to build a room whose walls, floor, and air are continually sanitized. The molds themselves are sterilized every fifteen minutes, and workers go through a four-step cleansing process each time they come into or leave the room.

When I was shopping for butter at Formaggio Kitchen (617-354-4750), in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the cheese buyer, Matthew Rubiner, told me that a shipment of Burro Occelli had just arrived. It had been shipped frozen, and I let it sit overnight at room temperature so that it would be just right for spreading. When I unwrapped it, that friendly rustic cow was plain to see, and the slight tang and nutty, deep, creamy flavor were clear to taste. Its appearance on

my kitchen table seemed one modern miracle worth cheering for.

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Illustration by Katarzyna Klein

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