

Making Butter

Contributed by Woodsprite

Making butter is easy and very satisfying!

In this world of additives and preservatives what could be more satisfying than homemade butter containing just two ingredients:

cream and a pinch of salt? Woodsprite shows you how...

What is Butter?

Butter is a dairy product made by churning the fat from milk until it solidifies. In the UK most butter is made from cow's milk but elsewhere goats, sheep and even mares milk is used. Butter was known to be made in 2000 B.C. but it was used less as a food than as an ointment, medicine or 'illuminating' oil. Originally it was churned in skin pouches thrown back and forth or swung over the back of a trotting horse. Later various hand churns were designed including the archetypal end over end churn used from the Tudor until the Victorian period.

How is it made?

Agitating cream breaks the fat droplet membranes and allows the fat molecules to come together (coalesce). When enough fat comes together a phase inversion takes place. The fat becomes the continuous phase and the water, the discontinuous phase. When the fat is a solid fat, the resulting material is butter.

Butter is over 80% fats with water making up the rest of the system. The remaining 20% is buttermilk.

STEP BY STEP

There are many ways of making butter but for convenience and speed nothing beats a food mixer.

Start the mixer with the whisk attachment on low speed (to avoid splatter) and progress to medium speed as the liquid begins to thicken.

At this stage, the cream drips in long thick strings. Just past the stiff peak stage the cream begins to crinkle up. This is when the cream is about to seize and become butter. The cream also takes on a very pale yellow colour.

A few seconds later, the mixer should churn the cream into butter. This happens quickly - the cream suddenly seizes and buttermilk floods out, while pellets of yellow butter form. You'll want to slow down your mixer at this point to prevent splashing the buttermilk all over your kitchen.

The amount of liquid that is expelled as the butter begins to mash together into a larger lump is considerable. At this point, it's best to remove the buttermilk (you can reserve it for use in baking recipes - use as if it was whole milk, not buttermilk) and keep mixing a bit longer. The buttermilk is only about as acidic as regular milk because we did not sour the cream before churning.

You can approximate store bought buttermilk (which is actually cultured buttermilk) by adding a little lemon juice, but it won't be quite the same. Also, our butter milk has a little more fat than the 1% fat cultured buttermilk sold in the supermarket.

The butter should be washed to remove as much of the butter milk as possible. This can be done by placing the butter in a colander and rinsing with cold water. Wash it until the water runs clear through the butter. Not washing will result in butter that may go rancid because of the buttermilk.

Using scotch hands or butter pats on a wet wooden board, you can now pat your butter into shape. Traditionally patterns were added to the top of a stick of butter to enable the customer to distinguish which farm the butter had come from. Farmer's wives would come into town on market day and sell their butter under the 'Butter Cross'.

Additional ingredients can be added to make new kinds of butter. Salted butter can be made by adding 1/4 teaspoon table salt to every 4 ounces (115 g) of butter at the patting stage. It is advisable to add salt to your butter to help preserve it a little longer. Other popular additions are herbs and garlic. Use about 1 clove of garlic, finely minced, for every 4 ounces of butter (or more if you like garlic). For herbed butter, I use about 2 Tbs. of dried herbs for every 4 ounces of butter.

The butter that is made this way is 'green' butter. By this I mean that the cream we used was fresh and not soured. The resulting butter will taste fresh and light.

Homemade butter will freeze for about 3 months. This isn't as long as store bought butter but it has none of the stabilisers and preservatives that are in store bought.