

BUTTER

A CULTURAL & CULINARY STAPLE



The world's first butter was probably made by accident some 10,000 years ago, the by-product of milk stored in a sheepskin bag jostled as it was transported on horseback until it created a smooth, creamy solid. It was love at first spread. Over the years butter became an integral part of cuisines around the world with regions putting their own unique twist on this multi-purpose dairy product.

FROM OFFERING TO ICON

In many ancient cultures butter was revered and given as an offering to the gods from the Celts to Sumerians and even as far east as Vedic cultures. Large mounds of butter have even recently been found buried (some thousands of years ago) in peat bogs in Ireland, and may have been placed there as a gift to gods or spirits or for preservation in the cool, anaerobic environment. Butter also served as a point of contention within the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages

when it was among the luxury food items forbidden during periods of fasting. Not a problem for those in the Mediterranean who mostly used olive oil anyway, but to central and northern Europe, butter was both a food source and cooking medium.

Butter sculptures have even played an important role in cultures around the world. Tibetan monks created *torma* sculptures as part of their spiritual practice. Today, the Iowa State Fair's butter cow tradition pays homage to the state's dairy industry while some Slavic Catholics still set their Easter tables with a butter lamb as a religious symbol. Butter was such an integral part of life in County Cork, Ireland—once the world's largest exporter of butter—that an entire museum is dedicated to the commodity.

CHEMISTRY

Cream becomes butter when milk fat globules create an opposite emulsion (from fat-in-water to water-in-fat) through

churning. Fats cluster around air bubbles. As more air is beat into the cream, more pressure is put on the fat globules and the thin membrane that surrounds them. Eventually those membranes rupture under the pressure and secrete liquid fats, creating a "glue" that causes the globules to stick together; the mixture first becomes foamy whipped cream and eventually a solid. The buttermilk is then drained off and the solids are kneaded together to form butter.

BUTTER VS. MARGARINE

Margarine was invented in the mid-19th century when Napoleon III called for a butter substitute for the army. Originally made with beef tallow, today margarine is made with partially hydrogenated vegetable fats and, because it doesn't require any dairy products, lasts longer and is cheaper to produce. Dairy lobbyists convinced numerous state legislatures in 1886 to impose taxes on margarine and later banned the additional coloring used



to make it look like butter. Margarine didn't gain wide acceptance until scarcity during the World Wars made butter difficult to obtain and news connecting saturated fats to health problems vilified butter. Margarine's popularity declined again after studies showed trans fats to be worse in any amount than saturated fats in a moderate amount. Health concerns, coupled with trends favoring less-processed foods, have led to a surge in butter's popularity.

MORE THAN A CONDIMENT

Butter serves multiple purposes in the kitchen. It can tenderize, caramelize, crumble, crisp, leaven, and emulsify dishes depending on technique, timing, and temperature. Butter makes flaky pastries crisper and cakes and cookies softer. It adds a smoothness to sauces and serves as a cooking fat. And what would bread be without butter? Or potatoes? With 120 flavor compounds,

BUTTER 101

Regular: Also known as sweet cream butter, by law must contain at least 80% butterfat and must be made from pasteurized milk. Comes in both salted and unsalted varieties.

Cultured: Made from cream that has begun to ferment. Traditionally that fermentation occurred naturally as cream was allowed to naturally separate from the milk over several days. Today, almost all dairy products in the U.S. are pasteurized to kill bacteria. Lactic acid is added to cultured butters to induce fermentation and yield its tangy taste.

European: More or less the same as cultured butter in the U.S. and the preferred style of the continent where many variations exist. Contains 82 to 85% butterfat, less moisture, and has a creamier texture. Best for making the ultra-flaky pastries associated with Europe.

Clarified: Made from rendering butter to eliminate water and milk solids, leaving just the butterfat. Commonly sold as ghee, a class of clarified butter. It has a higher smoke point than regular butter, making it better for cooking. Stays fresh longer than regular butter.

Whipped: Nitrogen gas is whipped into butter after churning so it remains soft at low temperatures. Not suitable for cooking, but because it is very spreadable, it is an excellent choice for a condiment.

Compound: Butter with herbs, spices, and aromatics mixed in. Frequently served over steak.

Clotted Cream: Clotted cream is milk or cream that is indirectly heated and left to cool in shallow pans where it clumps. The clots rise to the top and are separated. Its fat content is high enough that in the U.S. it is technically butter. It is used in cream tea where it is served with scones and berries, or with desserts.



butter also contributes taste to dishes.

Butter has the lowest smoke point (350°F) of any fat, but clarified butter (pure butterfat from which all milk and water have been removed) has a much higher smoke point (450° F) and can be used in many more applications.

Restaurants can add sophistication to their menus with butters made in-house. Whether churned, compounded, or just whipped, house-made butters add a unique touch. And compound butters are an especially easy way to dress seared steaks.

Common add-ins include herbs, spices, aromatics, acids, or sweeteners.

BEVERAGES

Butter isn't limited to baked goods, sauces, and topping breads; it's also used in various beverages around the world. Tibetans have consumed butter tea—traditionally made with tea leaves, yak butter, water, and salt—for generations. The tea is said to enable them to thrive in the high altitude by keeping them warm and providing fat and calories for energy.

This tradition is believed to have inspired bulletproof coffee, a trending morning beverage that involves melting a pat of butter into hot coffee.

Butter is also used in cocktails, including hot buttered rum. In recent years numerous butter-washed cocktails have also appeared on bar and restaurant menus, calling for melted butter to be combined with a spirit, left to sit for a few hours, and then chilled until the butter solidifies on top and is skimmed off, leaving the spirit infused with butter flavor.