

HOME FORUM

yogurts of the world

Culture never tasted so good!

SMOOTH,
TANGY, AND
SOMETIMES
THICK ENOUGH
TO CUT WITH
A KNIFE.

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Walking down the dairy section of the supermarket, a yogurt aficionado finds plenty to choose from. Among the multitude of flavored yogurts with varying percentages of fat, some have toppings, others have preserves at the bottom, still others can be sipped from a plastic bottle. Yet all this variety leaves old-world yogurt lovers wanting more.

Plain yogurt, pure as snow and without additives – that is the prize some immigrants crave. Traditionalists value pristine yogurt for its delicate tanginess, a subtle flavor often masked in commercial varieties of this dairy product. Many ethnic groups have time-tested ways of using this unsweetened and unsalted staple in their cooking.

The name yogurt comes from the Turkish word for milk that has fermented into a tart, semisolid mass. Culinary lore has it that milk – probably from goat or sheep – stored in an animal skin bag, transformed into this ready-to-eat, custard-like product overnight.

In the United States, yogurt, by definition, should have at least two species of bacteria – *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus* – in the culture used to ferment milk. Typically, traditional yogurts contain at least half a dozen different friendly bacterial strains. Myriad microbes feast on lactose, the sugar found in milk, and convert it to lactic acid, which makes yogurt slightly tart.

“It is true that some yogurts taste more delicious than others,” says David Fankhauser, a biology professor at the University of Cincinnati Clermont College. A yogurt lover himself, he once stopped at an island in the Bosphorus Strait in Turkey to sample *ayran*, a refreshing local drink made of yogurt.

Differences in ethnic yogurts

The taste of ethnic yogurts varies slightly even before they are transformed into signature dishes and drinks. This difference in taste is largely due to the diversity of bacterial flora present in any given kind of yogurt, says Patricia Christie, who teaches a class called Kitchen Chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Mass. Each yogurt has its own characteristic aroma and texture as well.

Middle Eastern countries have two kinds of yogurt – *laban* and the strained version *lebany*. “Straining gets rid of the liquid which makes yogurt acidic and this heavier version is more flavorful,” says Arpiar Afarian of Kalustyan’s, a specialty grocery store in New York. Three decades ago, few in New York had heard of *lebany* – a yogurt so dense, you can almost cut it with a knife. Olive oil and a dash of fragrant *zaatar* spices make this yogurt a good dip for pita bread, says Mr. Afarian. Dressed with cucumber and garlic, *lebany* makes an excellent appetizer. This starter’s Greek cousin would be *tzatziki*.

On the Indian subcontinent, yogurt – referred to as curds – is widely used as a dressing in *raithas*, a marinade for tandoori meats, and as a base for gravylike *kadis*. “Low-fat yogurt is a good substitute for heavy cream in vegetable or meat dishes cooked *makhani*-style – in a rich buttery sauce,” says Pushpinder Bhetia of Guru the Caterer in Somerville, Mass.

Smoothielike lassi, served in Indian restaurants worldwide, is yogurt blended with fruits. In villages, a similar welcome beverage of beaten yogurt is stored in



JOANNE CICCARELLO – STAFF

MANGO DELIGHT: A mango and cardamom lassi, or yogurt smoothie, is a popular beverage enjoyed in India and found in most Indian restaurants.

cool earthenware pots.

Curd rice, a soothing mixture of rice and creamy yogurt, is like a blessing in the fiercely hot summers of south India. Piquant regional specialties call for sour curds, but originally these dishes were probably just innovations to use up yogurt that had been left on the tropical kitchen counter too long.

Some South Asian immigrants prefer to make yogurt at home. Indira Singari, a Seattle food blogger, boils milk, cools it, and adds a spoonful of culture to make her own. “But honestly, I am not able to re-create the Indian curd taste with American milk,” says Ms. Singari. Part of the reason, she adds, is the fact that the cattle in India are raised on a different diet. However, a commercial brand, Desi Natural Dahi – made by a dairy farm on the East Coast – is available in Indian grocery stores.

Crossover yogurts

Northern Europe has many fermented milk products, but technically they are not yogurts. “They involve very different microbes,” says Dr. Fankhauser. The case is the same with *kefir*, a fermented drink, ubiquitous in many countries that were part of the former Soviet Union. Iceland, however, has a low-fat strained yogurt, *skyr*, that is now marketed by Whole Foods.

Greek yogurt or *giaurti* is a good example of a crossover yogurt. “There are few things which taste so good that are actually good for you,” says Ann Graham Nichols, a food blogger from East Lansing, Mich., who is enraptured by the taste of this chunky yogurt.

Aspasia Daskalopoulou, a native of Greece who now lives in New England, eats this strained yogurt like a dessert or a snack, layered with honey and almonds or pecans.

As more people look to avoid sugary foods, ethnic yogurts could step up to the plate. Some do take getting used to because they are not overly sweetened as their American counterparts are. “But American palates are becoming more and more aware of the benefits of just plain old yogurt,” says Dr. Christie.

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For a Fried Eggplant in
Yogurt recipe, go to:
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MANGO LASSI

1/2 teaspoon saffron
1/2 cup mango fruit pulp (optional)
3 cups low-fat yogurt
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
1/2 cup crushed ice
Sweetener (honey, sugar, or any sugar substitute)

In a small cup, add boiling water to cover the saffron threads and set aside for 20 minutes until the saffron is ready to yield its rich gold color to the lassi.

Canned mango pulp is available in South Asian grocery stores and is already sweetened. Chunks of frozen mango will work well, too, though the fruit flavor may not be as intense. Fresh skinned, very ripe mangoes can be also used. Purée them first to get half a cup of pulp in the blender.

Add all the ingredients to a blender along with half a cup of crushed ice. Blend well till the liquid mixture becomes light and frothy. Add some water if necessary. This drink is easier to pour than an average smoothie.

Sweeten to taste. It can be refrigerated for up to four hours. If you leave it much longer, the drink will look curdled, although the taste will not be altered significantly. Serve chilled. Makes 3 servings.