

Butter: A Rich History

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"Edifying from every point of view--historical, cultural, and culinary." -David Tanis, author of *A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes*

It's a culinary catalyst, an agent of change, a gastronomic rock star. Ubiquitous in the world's most fabulous cuisines, butter is boss. Here, it finally gets its due.

After traveling across three continents to stalk the modern story of butter, award-winning food writer and former pastry chef Elaine Khosrova serves up a story as rich, textured, and culturally relevant as butter itself.

From its humble agrarian origins to its present-day artisanal glory, butter has a fascinating story to tell, and Khosrova is the perfect person to tell it. With tales about the ancient butter bogs of Ireland, the pleasure dairies of France, and the sacred butter sculptures of Tibet, Khosrova details butter's role in history, politics, economics, nutrition, and even spirituality and art. Readers will also find the essential collection of core butter recipes, including *beurre manié*, croissants, *petite brioche*, and the only buttercream frosting anyone will ever need, as well as practical how-tos for making various types of butter at home--or shopping for the best.

"A fascinating, tasty read . . . And what a bonus to have a collection of essential classic butter recipes included." -David Tanis, author of *A Platter of Figs and Other Recipes*

"Following the path blazed by Margaret Visser in *Much Depends on Dinner*, Elaine Khosrova makes much of butter and the ruminants whose milk man churns. You will revel in dairy physics. And you may never eat margarine again." -John T. Edge, author of *The Potlikker Papers: A Food History of the Modern South*

"Butter proves that close study can reveal rich history, lore, and practical information. All that and charm too." -Mimi Sheraton, author of *1,000 Foods to Eat Before You Die*

"Irresistible and fascinating . . . This is one of those definitive books on a subject that every cook should have." -Elisabeth Prueitt, co-owner of *Tartine Bakery*

"The history of one of the most delectable ingredients throughout our many cultures and geography over time is wonderfully churned and emulsified in Khosrova's *Butter* . . . Delightful storytelling." -Elizabeth Falkner, author of *Demolition Desserts: Recipes from Citizen Cake*

Elaine Khosrova is an independent writer who specializes in stories about food history and gastronomic culture. A former pastry chef and fellowship student at the Culinary Institute of America, Elaine holds a BS in food and nutrition. She began her career in food publishing as a test kitchen editor at *Country Living* magazine, followed by staff positions at *Healthy Living*, *Classic American Home*, and *Santitas Magazine*. In 2007, she received a Gold Folio journalism award, and in 2008 she became the founding editor of *culture*, a national consumer magazine about specialty cheese that continues to serve cheese enthusiasts. She's contributed to numerous national food and lifestyle publications, as well as the forthcoming *Oxford Companion to Cheese*. After many excursions into the world of dairy for the sake of cheese lit, Elaine left *culture* magazine in 2013 to begin research on

her book about butter--the first and only publication (thus far) to chronicle the life and times of this beloved fat. Her butter chase took Elaine throughout the United States and to France, Ireland, India, Bhutan, and Canada. She's never been the same. An avid cook, baker, traveler, camper, cyclist, and musician, Elaine lives with her family in New York's Hudson Valley. ONE

Grass, Cud, Cream

BEGINNING THE BUTTER TRIP

The Epping butter is most highly esteemed in London and its neighbourhood; great part of it is made from cows which feed during the summer months in Epping Forest, where the leaves and shrubby plants are understood greatly to contribute to its superior flavour.

-JOSIAH TWAMLEY, *Essays on the Management of Dairy*, 1816

I LIVE BETWEEN TWO SMALL DAIRY FARMS IN UPSTATE New York. At both ends of the dirt road that fronts my house, cows amble up and down the slanted pastures most of the year, chewing on the landscape. I often marvel at how their bodies transform the raw weeds and green of the field into snow-white milk. The fact that their milk is laden with the supple fat that men conjure into golden butter seems all the more incredible. There's a Rumpelstiltskin-like magic to these dairy conversions. Even if modern science can explain the processes in cold detail, I find them no less dazzling. In fact, as I discovered writing this book, knowing all the intricate workings of animal nature and human endeavor that turn plant life into butter only added to my fascination.

And yet butter is uniformly taken for granted. It is common, after all. The girl next door, lovely but overlooked. Even for me, a food professional with more than two decades of experience as a pastry chef, test kitchen editor, and food writer, butter had long lived in the culinary shadows. My work paid and trained me to seek out the exotic, the celebrity foods, the Next Big Thing. Not a simple yellow stick that's in everyone's fridge. Although I cooked and baked often with butter and always had it on the table, I hardly gave this dairy staple much thought. It wasn't until several years ago, when I was assigned an editorial project to taste, describe, and rate about two dozen different brands from creameries around the world, that I did a double take on butter. On the tasting table were bricks of butter from as far away as New Zealand, Italy, the Czech Republic, Ireland, and France, plus domestic brands from Vermont, Wisconsin, California, and places in between. At the time, the task seemed like a redundant one. Butter is so elemental, I thought, how different from one another could they really be?

But as I examined and tasted each sample, I was surprised that no two were alike. I found nuances in color, consistency, milkiess, salt content, sweetness, acidity, freshness, even nutty and herbal notes. Some glistened; others were matte. Some butters slumped as they sat at room temperature, others stood firm. Several had a fresh, lactic taste while a few were cultured and more tangy. One was made from the milk of goats, another from water buffalo. Cataloging this global collection, with their odd labels and unfamiliar names, I began to sense that these sticks and bricks represented both the universal and the particular of this thing we call butter (which has at least fifty-seven aliases around the world; see appendix B). All the products were essentially made the same way--from

churning milk fat-yet each sample was distinguishable from another. It was as if every butter brand was a kind of message in a bottle, relaying a distinct sense of place.

It turns out that my impression wasn't just a romantic one. Every detail of a particular butter's character is indeed formed from the unique commingling of three living variables: man, plant, and beast. They work as a kind of relay team, beginning with the plant forage (or ration) that feeds the dairy animal, which in turn gives milk to the farmer, who then supplies the butter maker with cream, which is then churned into butter (and buttermilk). In combination, all of these individual players and conditions account for both the subtle and substantial butter differences I detected on the tasting table that day. As this trio of live factors varies from one place and time to another, sweet butter can express locality in a very pure, direct way. (Other dairy products, like yogurt and cheese, can make a similar claim, but these fermented products generally require more time and biological intervention to produce. Uncultured butter, on the other hand, can be borne almost immediately.)

Before dairy industrialization began in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century, the local terroir of a butter was much in evidence: every farmhouse was in essence a tiny artisan creamery, dispensing its version of the stuff (for better or worse). But by the twentieth century-the era when men and machines would completely displace generations of farmwives and dairymaids in the production of butter-the new milk co-ops and automated creameries ushered in conformity, consistency, and a new standard of freshness. As this industrial dairy model grew, butter from the factory churn came to reflect the technology of megaproducers rather than the terroir of local farms and small-scale makers. National brands emerged, which meant you could buy butter in, say, Michigan that tasted identical to one on the shelf in Maryland. (We've come to take this convenient uniformity for granted too, but it's a very recent phenomenon in the long arc of dairy history.)

Now, in the twenty-first century, technology has been thrown in reverse. A "slow butter" revivalism is emerging, especially where the demand for local products and the lure of artisan food is high. The ranks of these new outliers on the butter-making scene include mostly entrepreneurial low-tech dairy folk looking to sustain their farms and way of life. But there's also a sizable troupe of chefs, avid foodists, and staunch do-it-yourselfers-all batch-churning their own microbutters for an enthusiastic niche of eaters.

Lauding this movement is not to suggest that there's anything wrong with industrial butter production. Indeed, as detailed in chapter 6, the advent of dairy factories in the late nineteenth century greatly raised butter standards across the board and gave it a new threshold of freshness. But whenever a traditional food is rediscovered by artisans, we stand to gain interesting choices, perchance even more delicious, creative, and/or healthful ones. (Consider the modern bread revolution, for example, or the neochocolate scene.) Politically there can be benefits as well, when we get to vote our values by buying less processed, more locally crafted foods that short cut the farm-to-fork journey.

Butter allows another kind of trip too. For the inquisitive eater who savors more than just the taste of things, butter's story is a ticket to appreciating the mighty role a simple food

can play in the course of human events. One of the oldest of man-made edibles, butter's history is our history. In part, the purpose of this book is to show how the life and times of butter have been deeply entwined with much that has gone on far from the kitchen and creamery. Beginning with early butter practices devised for the religious, spiritual, and medicinal needs of communities, to its impact on empire building and technology of the Industrial Revolution, and later to butter's twentieth-century battle with margarine makers and fat-free zealots, this is a food, unlike any other, whose history reveals our ambitions as much as our appetite.

The contemporary butter world, in all its multicultural wonder, is no less remarkable. In the course of doing research for this book, I traveled on three continents and across the United States, each stop adding another strong thread to the weave of butter's modern narrative. Of course, I also gleaned many facts about butter from books, articles, and online sources, but for the full sensorial experience of butter and the people and regions it comes from, I had to dust off my passport. To see the making of butter from water buffalo milk in Punjab, India, and taste it fresh from the churn was nothing like watching and sampling sheep butter making in California and cow's butter in Brittany and industrial butter making in Wisconsin.

Front-line food study like this is called field research, but to me it was more like butter hunting. Capturing firsthand details helped me construct a time capsule of butter life as it exists now, as well as record some of the ancient methods that are rapidly disappearing in many remote areas, where new generations have eschewed their parents' subsistence chores and occupations. Working the butter beat also led me to some interesting encounters on the fringes of dairydom. I met with a former Buddhist nun to learn about the intricacies of Tibetan butter carving, and with various scientists to understand udders, soil, and fat metabolism. I spent a week in a large fridge with the artist who sculpts the Iowa State Fair butter cow each year, and I met with a New Jersey man to see his vast personal collection of vintage butter making equipment and ephemera. I've toured the Butter Museum in Cork, Ireland, the Maison du Beurre in Brittany, and gazed up at the infamous Butter Tower in Rouen, France. And in bakeries, restaurants, and culinary schools, I've watched chefs work their magic with butter.

Still, the most essential players in the story of butter aren't the people or institutions that I've met or who appear at various points in its timeline. That honor goes to the animals that first make the milk that begets butter. The true provenance of butter isn't just cultural; it's also anatomical.

WE OWE THE PLEASURE of every buttery morsel to a legion of four-legged farmstead moms. Because these udder-equipped mothers start to make milk as soon as their newborns arrive and for many months after, we have become the beneficiaries of a seemingly perpetual lactic supply. From this daily cascade of animal milk, butter makers extract the richest portion—cream—to churn into the solids we call butter. (It's possible to churn whole, nonhomogenized milk into butter too, but the process takes much longer and is trickier to manage.)

Considering what causes maternity and milk in the first place, one might argue that butter actually begins with sex, usually with the tryst of a bull and cow that makes a baby calf. And more than a century ago that would have been true. But since the invention of artificial insemination for livestock, this carnal connection to butter is no longer a given. Either by philosophical choice or by necessity, only small dairies (including goat and sheep operations) rely on animal attraction to trigger pregnancy and thereby lactation. Otherwise, many dairy gals never even see a bull (or buck or ram)-let alone cavort with one.

Although maternity flips the switch of milk production in many species all across the world, none make it so abundantly as the kinds of livestock that have become synonymous with dairy farming. Cows especially, but producers also count on the milk from sheep, goats, yak, buffalo, and camels. All of these animals belong to a mixed race of champion milk makers known as ruminants, who share some distinct anatomical features: a three- or four-sectioned stomach and a mouth equipped with an upper "dental pad" instead of teeth. It's these unique body parts-which serve to harvest and ferment plants-that make the lactating ruminant a virtual processing plant on legs, able to turn whole fields of green into butter² fat-laden milk. Ruminant milk varies as much as the mothers that produce it. A ewe, for example, will give milk with twice the fat content of cow's milk; goat's milk has fat molecules that are smaller and more digestible, but it lacks carotene so goat butter is white; milk from a yak has less milk sugar (lactose) and more protein than cow's milk; camel's milk is similar to goat's milk in composition, but it can have up to three times as much vitamin C; and the milk of water buffalo has 100 percent more fat than cow's milk.

Cheese makers have long used the idiosyncrasies in different animal milks to their advantage-think of all the choices in the cheese aisle between cow, goat, sheep, and water buffalo products. But for most butter makers, cow's milk is still *sine qua non*. Delicious butters made from other ruminant milks can be found around the world (one of my favorites was from a water buffalo in India)-but the practical fact is that cows are the most generous, manageable, and affordable source of butterfat, especially in these modern times. The average yield of milk from a cow in the fourteenth century was between 140 to 170 gallons per season; the twenty-first-century Holstein cow now gives an average of 2,574 gallons per lactation. Medieval milk yield records were so low partly because calves got their fair share and because the cows were hand-milked in the field by dairymaids, not by machine. But the greater reason is that cattle were valued primarily for their labor in the fields and only incidentally as a source of milk. They were neither fed nor bred for high milk production, as they have been over the past two centuries. Generations of modern cows have been subject to efficient mechanical or robotic milking equipment, extended lactating periods, and synthetic hormones to increase their milk output.

Abundance, however, is no guarantee of quality. Butter makers continually monitor their cream supply for flaws, knowing full well that it's a capricious commodity. Like milk, it expresses the history of ever-changing conditions, both internal and external to the animal, and each batch of churned cream translates this history to the butter it becomes, affecting the butter's color, density, richness, tanginess, sweetness, and flavor nuances.

Professional butter makers will read, sniff, and measure these subtle variations and adapt their methods accordingly (as described in chapter 8), but the cream's inherent chemical and physical nuances, or lack thereof, can make the difference between a ho-hum butter and a remarkable one. To some extent, when you taste a great butter, you're savoring the sensitive workings of a hidden ecosystem operating inside every milk-making ruminant. This internal apparatus is the precursor to all that happens in the creamery. Like most things in nature, it's ingenious and intricate. In essence, to give butterfat, a ruminating mother plays host to a long procession of digestive ploys whereby anatomy meets botany in order to rearrange chemistry.

THE CREAM-RICH MILK THAT a pastured cow deposits twice a day in the milking parlor begins in the grassy sward beyond her barn home, where she'll typically dine on different kinds of cultivated grasses and legumes, as well as on some wild flowers. If her belly is feeling a little off that day, she might also nibble on certain herbs or shrubs if they're available; cows will self-medicate if given the remedial plant choice in the pasture. While grazing, if a cow spies a clump of grass-or if she's lucky, a tasty patch of clover-she uses her tongue to lasso a bunch of it. She tears the greens free by pinching them between her bottom teeth and a thick upper gum area-the dental pad referred to earlier. (If she could smile broadly, you'd see that she has no top front teeth, just a dark leathery band.) Inside her mouth, the grass gets moistened with saliva and then swallowed-but only temporarily. This wet grassy mixture stored in the rumen, the first compartment of her stomach, will eventually return to her mouth. But first she'll continue dining on the pasture for about an hour, lopping off and swallowing vegetation. If the grass is soft and high, she can take in a hefty eighty to ninety pounds of fresh plant matter in that time.

Then our gal will find a nice place to settle down, often reclining near others in the herd and almost always listing toward her left side. (For some unknown reason, cows are more comfy this wa...

Other Books

The Bread and Butter Stories, Reminiscent of Elizabeth von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor, these 15 recently discovered short stories by the author of *The Borrowers* are wonderful period pieces about being an upper-middle class woman in the 1940s and early 50s. Many are reminiscent of *Brief Encounter* with their longings for adventure or romance to break the stifling constraints on their lives. Here are respectable conventional women settled into dull marriages finding themselves entertaining the notion of an affair while on holiday; a dowdy woman who suddenly decides to have her face done and take the £1.00 post-office savings and blow it on a fine hat. Then there are funny, satirical pieces: useful knowledge like how to cure cold feet at bedtime, a sideways look at acting for a television drama and a very entertaining and fascinating piece on writing for children which includes dialogue with an editor who wants short words and happy stories. Written with a wry and gentle humour, the collection makes for fascinating reading.

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