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Good Housekeeping:
Food Encyclopedia

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Extract

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Foreword

Good cooking starts with good ingredients, but with such a dazzling array in shops and markets, it can be tricky to know what to buy and how to prepare it. Deli counters and specialist food shops are a feast for the senses: piles of plump, oozing cheeses – a mix of the familiar and the unusual – cured meats of every description, herbs and spices that tempt you to experiment. Meat counters and butchers sell anything from familiar racks of lamb and pork chops to forgotten nose-to-tail cuts that are a gift to the frugal cook. Fish counters no longer sell just cod, haddock, monkfish and plaice but give space to ever more exotic fish such as tilapia and megrim. If you're an experienced cook, the culinary opportunities are endless and exciting – but if you're a novice it can be baffling.

For more than 80 years, Good Housekeeping has been giving inspirational, failsafe advice on how to cook, underpinned by an expert understanding of ingredients. An essential addition to your bookshelf, this encyclopaedia is an invaluable work of reference, whatever your level of cooking expertise. Ingredients are explained and beautifully photographed, techniques are made clear with step-by-step instructions, and there's a collection of classic, foolproof, tried-and-tested recipes at the end of the book to inspire you.

Karen Barnes
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Good Housekeeping

Dairy, cheese and eggs

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Milk

Cow

Milk is a highly nutritious food, and cow's milk is a major source of both protein and calcium. It is usually pasteurised and sometimes homogenised. In pasteurisation, the milk is briefly heated to a high temperature to sterilise it and destroy natural bacteria without making it taste as though it has been cooked. Homogenisation breaks down the globules of fat so that they remain in solution, in order to keep the cream from separating and rising to the top; this makes the milk more digestible. Unpasteurised milk is available and is preferred by some for its creamy richness. However, it carries a health risk and should be avoided by those vulnerable to infection, such as pregnant women, the elderly and people whose immune systems are compromised. Jersey or Channel Island milk is the richest and creamiest, with 4.8 per cent fat content. Ordinary full-fat (whole) milk has around 3.25–3.8 per cent fat; 1 and 2 per cent fat are commonly found levels for semi-skimmed; and skimmed has almost all the cream removed. UHT or long-life milk is homogenised then briefly heated to an ultra-high temperature, which keeps it fresh for months. Once opened, it should be treated as fresh milk. Its flavour is altered by the heat treatment.

TO USE Drink hot or cold or mix with other drinks; pour on cereals; a basic ingredient in sauces, soups, batters, pancakes and desserts.

Goat and sheep

The milk of goats and sheep has long been an important part of the human diet – indeed more people in the world consume goat's milk than that of cows. Goats and sheep have been domesticated for longer than cattle; goats were being 'farmed' 9,000 years ago. Goat's milk is naturally homogenised (the small globules of cream are evenly distributed in the milk) and has less lactose (the natural sugar in milk) than cow's milk. It is easier to digest and less allergenic. Those with a lactose intolerance, or children suffering from asthma, eczema and skin disorders, can try replacing cow's milk with goat's milk. It contains more of the minerals manganese, potassium and copper as well as vitamins A and D, but less folic acid than cow's milk.

Sheep's milk is rich, with a slightly sweet taste. It is higher in total solids than cow's or goat's milk, and is high in calcium and zinc. It will keep for up to four months in the freezer.

TO USE Drink cold; pour on cereals, or substitute for cow's milk in cooking.

Condensed

Pasteurised, homogenised cow's milk is processed to become condensed milk by boiling it until it has reduced to about a third of its original volume. Heat causes the natural sugars to caramelise, creating a sweeter flavour, but often sugar is also added to act as a preservative. Condensed milk is thick and viscous and the colour slightly darker than that of fresh milk. In Asia and parts of Europe, condensed milk is added to tea or, in Vietnam, to coffee. It is also spread on bread. Canned condensed milk has a long shelf life and will last for years if unopened. Once opened, keep in the fridge and use within a few days.

TO USE In fudge and sauces; the main ingredient for dulce de leche toffee sauce (originally from Latin America); use for pies, cheesecakes and desserts.

Evaporated

To produce evaporated milk, unhomogenised milk is boiled until it has just half its original volume. It is then homogenised, canned and sterilised. It has a pouring consistency and is thinner than condensed milk, but it has a similar colour. The process alters the taste, making it stronger in flavour than fresh milk. Evaporated milk can be used in the same way as fresh by mixing it with an equal amount of water. It has a long shelf life and will last for years in its can if unopened. Once opened, keep in the fridge and use within a few days.

TO USE Pour over desserts instead of cream; in sauces and desserts; in coffee.

Dried/powdered

Powdered milk is made from skimmed milk using a process called spray-drying. After drying it is packaged in cans or jars to protect the powder from moisture, air and light. It needs to be reconstituted in a little cold water before being made up to the required volume. The flavour is different from (and inferior to) that of fresh, but the difference is not noticeable if used in cooked foods. Baby-formula manufacturers and commercial sweet factories use dried whole milk. Powdered milk keeps well for months, but should be treated as fresh milk once reconstituted. Mix well to dissolve any lumps. Convenience is the main advantage of powdered milk over any other kind. Few people would claim to enjoy its flavour more than they enjoy the flavour of fresh.

TO USE Reconstituted, it can be used for cooking or for drinks. The addition of flavourings, such as chocolate powder, will disguise the taste if necessary. Used for machine breadmaking.

Buttermilk

The liquid left over after churning cream into butter is called buttermilk. Commercially produced, cultured buttermilk is pasteurised and homogenised. The presence of lactic acid, formed during fermentation, acts as a natural preservative, and buttermilk will keep well in the fridge or freezer. It is composed of water, mineral salts, protein and milk sugar and has a thickened texture and sour flavour. As it does not contain any cream, it is lower in fat and calories than ordinary milk, but higher in potassium, vitamin B^{12} and calcium. It is also easier to digest. Buttermilk is often used to make pancakes in the US, and its tangy flavour goes well in the batter used for fried chicken.

TO USE As a drink; in baking, to add flavour and, when combined with bicarbonate of soda, to act as a raising agent for soda bread and scones.

Cream

Single and double cream

Cream, the fat globules in milk, is one of the richest and most luxurious of foodstuffs, capable of enhancing the texture and body of any dish to which it is added. At one time, cream was left to separate from the milk and collect at the top, when it was simply 'creamed off'; nowadays the process is a mechanical one. Cream is classified according to its fat content, which also determines its use, and most is pasteurised. Single cream (around 18 per cent fat) cannot be whipped, but it is excellent for pouring. Whipping cream and double cream can be whipped until thick: whipping cream has the lower fat content of the two (around 38 per cent as opposed to 48 per cent in double), and gives a lighter result. Extra-thick cream has been homogenised, so is not suitable for whipping – use as a rich spooning cream. Cream may curdle when heated; if you are using it in cooking, do not let the mixture reach boiling point after cream has been added. Double cream is the best to use in cooking, as it is less likely to curdle. All creams have a short shelf life and should be kept in the fridge.

TO USE In its various types, to add to sauces, soups, savoury and sweet dishes; a main ingredient in ice creams and other desserts; as a topping for fruit, cakes, puddings and breakfast cereals; added to drinks.

Clotted cream

This very rich cream (fat content 55 per cent) is a speciality of south-west England and is often called Cornish or Devonshire cream. Traditionally the milk was put in shallow pans until the cream had risen to the top, heated to about 82°C and cooked for 30 minutes, then left to cool overnight. Today it is produced in factories by scalding and cooking the cream until it forms a thick yellow crust, which is then skimmed off. Clotted cream is a close relation of the Near Eastern kaymak, which is believed to have been brought to Cornwall by Phoenician traders more than 2,000 years ago. Clotted cream has a distinctive 'cooked' taste, keeps for much longer than ordinary cream and is too thick to pour.

TO USE Main ingredient of a cream tea, served with scones and jam; in ice cream; as a dessert topping.

Aerosol cream

Aerosol cream has a recognisably creamy and slightly sweet taste. Cream that has been treated at an ultra-high temperature to preserve it (UHT cream) is whipped and packed into aerosol containers with stabilisers and up to 13 per cent added sugar. A gas propellant is added to expel the cream under high pressure when the container's nozzle is opened. To serve, simply shake the can and turn upside down; press the nozzle and the cream shoots out as a foam. Aerosol cream should be used just before serving as it does not hold its shape for long periods and quickly melts; it is not suitable for decoration. Keep in the fridge once opened and use within a few days. Aerosol cream is a convenience product only, and should not be regarded as a substitute for home-made whipped cream.

TO USE To top desserts or drinks.

Crème fraîche

As its name suggests, crème fraîche is a French ingredient and the best comes from a strictly controlled area of Normandy, Isigny-sur-Mer. It is made by leaving fresh cream from pasteurised cow's milk to mature and ferment through the action of natural bacteria. The process thickens the cream slightly and gives it a deliciously rich, slightly sharp taste. Crème fraîche adds a slight tang to savoury dishes and acts as a thickener. A great advantage of cooking with crème fraîche is that it does not curdle like most other creams. It keeps better than fresh cream, too – ten to 14 days in the fridge – although it will become thicker as time passes. Half-fat crème fraîche, containing additives such as thickeners and stabilisers, is also available. You can make your own crème fraîche at home by gently heating together double cream with soured cream or buttermilk, then leaving the mixture in a warm place until thick.

TO USE Mixed with sugar and vanilla as a filling for crêpes; on desserts and breakfast cereals; in sweet and savoury dishes.

Soured cream

Traditionally, soured cream (also called sour cream) was made by allowing fresh cream to sour naturally. Today it is produced under more controlled conditions, by inoculating pasteurised and homogenised single cream with starter cultures of bacteria to convert the lactose (the natural sugar in milk) into lactic acid. The cream is kept warm to encourage the growth of the bacteria until it is sour and thick. Then it is re-pasteurised to halt the souring process. It has around 18 per cent fat and a sharp, tangy taste. Soured cream cannot be whipped. It will curdle if boiled, and should be brought to room temperature before adding to a hot liquid. A traditional and widely loved ingredient in the cuisines of Eastern and Central Europe, it is used both as an ingredient and as a topping. It is an essential last-minute addition to Hungarian goulash, and a favoured topping for blini, Russian buckwheat pancakes.

TO USE Add to sweet and savoury dishes; use in salad dressings; as a garnish alongside meat dishes or as a topping for soups; mix with snipped chives or spring onions and serve with jacket potatoes.

Panna da cucina

This UHT (ultra-high temperature) treated long-life cream is a staple in Italian cooking – particularly in sauces. Sold in waxed cartons, it is twice as thick as whipping cream. Panna da cucina needs to be stirred well before using, as it may separate; thin with a little milk if necessary.

Other varieties include smetana or smietana, which is used in a similar way in Central and Eastern European countries. Sometimes referred to as 'sour cream', it is actually a mixture of soured and fresh cream and has a milder taste than soured cream alone.

TO USE Excellent blended into sauces, especially those used for pasta dishes, soups and anything savoury. Use in place of soured cream on canapés or with fresh fruit.