



Cheese Making: Homemade Ricotta

Story by Jackie Rebideau, photo by Margo Mayer

We all know about Little Miss Muffet eating her curds and whey. But what exactly are curds and whey? To put it simply, when milk is transformed into cheese, the fatty solids (curds) are separated from the protein liquid (whey).

In order to create the curds and whey, you need to use a coagulant. Nearly all cheese requires an enzyme called rennet as the coagulant, but ricotta is what is known as an acid cheese. When making ricotta, lemon juice is used as the coagulating agent. You can use fresh lemon juice or bottled lemon juice but stay away from the lemon-shaped containers that you see in the produce aisle.

After you obtain ½ cup of lemon juice, you need to get one gallon of milk. Whole milk works the best as fat free milk doesn't contain the fatty elements needed for the curds, but feel free to use 2%, which works well, or experiment with 1%. The important thing is that you cannot use ultra-pasteurized milk. The milk you get at your local grocery store is not ultra-pasteurized so it will work just fine.

Let's make some cheese. Pour the gallon of milk into a large enough pot so you will be able to stir it. Over medium/low heat, slowly bring the temperature up to 185–200° (yes, you will need a thermometer). As it is heating, occasionally stir the milk but try to not scrape the bottom of the pot just in case some of it has burned.

Once temperature is achieved, remove the milk from the heat. Disperse the lemon juice into the milk (pouring it through a slotted spoon as you circle it over the milk works well). Stir throughout but again try to not scrape the bottom of the pot. You should immediately see small white solids floating around in a light yellow liquid. If you don't, feel free to add a splash more lemon juice. You can continue to add a bit more until you achieve this separation. You won't harm

your ricotta. And if you end up adding a little too much juice, you will have created Lemon Cheese instead.

Next, you will have to strain the curds from the whey. Place a colander or strainer in a bowl large enough to hold all of the whey. Line the strainer with butter muslin or a tea towel. You don't want to use cheese cloth for Ricotta because the curds are small and may slip through the holes. Pour your curds and whey into the butter muslin. Now you will need to "hang" the curds to allow additional whey to escape. Take opposite corners of the butter muslin and tie them in a knot. Do the same with the other two corners. You will need to find a place where you can hang it over a bowl or sink as whey will be dripping.

The consistency you want will determine the length of hang time. If you want it moist and spreadable, only set about 15 minutes. If you want it firmer and crumbly, you will want to hang for an hour or more.

One gallon of whole milk will make approximately 1½ pounds of cheese and can be refrigerated up to seven days, but it is best to use it freshly made. I suggest that you adapt the recipe to make only the volume you need.

Note that you can do this same process by substituting whey for the milk. This is referred to as "whey ricotta." This method makes for a creamier cheese but the volume will be a lot lower because remember that curds have already been removed from this whey. Also note that in order to use this recipe, you must use whey from a cheese made with rennet. Mozzarella is a good example of this.

Jackie Rebideau, owner of Fromage to Yours, offers cheese making classes and cheese tours throughout Denver. She is the founder of the Colorado Cheese Festival and the annual Kefs & Curds event. For more information, please call 720-220-3210.