

smooth luxury

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BEFORE YOGHURT WAS TAKEN UP AS A HEALTH FOOD, IT WAS CONSIDERED
A LUXURIOUS TREAT. IT DESERVES TO BE SO MUCH MORE.



What a versatile food yoghurt is! It can be used in place of milk, buttermilk, cream and sour cream in many applications, as well as appearing in its own right as a drink, soup, sauce, salad, relish, cheese, snack, preservative, breakfast food or dessert from Scandinavia to Australia. It originated in Central Asia, was introduced to the Middle East by the Turks and has been a staple food of Turkey, the Balkans, India, the Middle East and Central Asia for many centuries.

It was confined to these traditional countries until quite recently, but, with the spread of foreign foods and the mass production of 'snack foods' which started in the second half of the 20th century, it has reached almost every corner of the globe. As it reached Western Europe via Turkey, much of the world knows it by a variation on its Turkish name, *yourt*, which has been adapted into English as *yoghurt*, *yogurt* or *yoghourt*. It is made from the milk of all dairy animals: cows, ewes, goats, water buffalos, mares, camels and dris (female yaks). The texture, flavour and other qualities vary depending on the animal. Technically, yoghurt is the fermented, coagulated product created when acid-producing bacteria convert the sugar (lactose) in milk into lactic acid, but millions of people around the world know it as a much more useful and delicious food than that.

SO HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?

No doubt, the first yoghurt happened spontaneously when whole milk was left too long and the acid-producing bacteria naturally present went to work converting sugar to acid. At first the milk appeared spoiled, but necessity dictates that nothing is wasted and people noticed that it lasted longer than fresh milk and tasted good (the lactic



acid created by the fermentation gives yoghurt its distinctive sharp, refreshing taste). They then set about trying to recreate this happy accident, and the use of the same containers already inoculated with the right bacteria, or adding some of the previous batch of curdled milk to fresh milk, soon created a consistent product.

Yoghurt cannot occur spontaneously with today's pasteurised milk, as the acid-producing bacteria in raw milk have been killed off and so less desirable bacteria invade first and take hold, turning the milk sour in an unpleasant way, before the acid-producing bacteria can reinoculate the milk and work their magic. Today, yoghurt is made by adding the desired bacteria (most often *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* and *Streptococcus thermophilus*) to pasteurised milk (with the cream removed) under controlled conditions. Skim milk powder is often added to give a creamier taste and gelatine can also be added as a stabiliser.

YOGHURT PRODUCTS

Yoghurt's refreshing qualities make it a perfect drink in hot climates. *Ayran*, popular in Turkey and the Middle East, is yoghurt thoroughly blended with water, seasoned with salt and fresh or dried mint. In Iran and Afghanistan, it is called *abdugh* or *doogh*, and is sold as a carbonated bottled drink. Indian *lassi*, sweet or savoury, is yet another variation on this theme. Smoothies—yoghurt blended with fresh fruit and sometimes sweetened with honey, are the modern Western version of these healthy and refreshing drinks. *Kefir*, a fermented drink made from yoghurt, originates in the Caucasian mountains and is one of the oldest known cultured milk products—it foams and fizzes like beer.

One of the most interesting uses for this already preserved food, is the ancient tradition of combining it with grains, then sun-drying it to provide a storable and easily reconstituted form of nourishment through the sparse winter months when fresh milk is less available. Known as *kashk* (or *kishk*) in the Middle East, Egypt, Turkey and Caucasia, and *tarhana* (*trahana* or *tarhonya*) in the Balkans and Hungary, it consists of salted yoghurt combined with cracked wheat or barley, sun-dried then crumbled to a powder for easy

YOGHURT MARRIES WELL WITH:

olive oil	honey
chilli	fruit
coriander	cucumber
cumin	eggplant
dill	fennel
garlic	onions
mint	spinach
oregano	chicken
parsley	lamb
thyme	rice
salt	pastry

storage. It is reconstituted into a breakfast porridge, soup or sauce, added to soups, rice or meat dishes to thicken and enrich them, or cooked alone as a pilaf. Quroot of Central Asia, is similar, but is dried yoghurt without grains.

Given its refreshing qualities, yoghurt is very commonly used as a dip, spread, or side dish. From Greece to India, it is paired with another very refreshing food, cucumber, sometimes with the addition of dill or mint. In India, it is also combined with bananas, grapes, coconut and spinach to form cooling side dishes alongside fiery curries. It can also be used to make a low-fat

creamy dressing for modern salads. Yoghurt can be hung overnight in a muslin cloth, refrigerated, so that much of the whey drips out and a soft curd is formed. This 'yoghurt cheese' is very popular in Lebanon. Called labneh, it is mixed with salt, and often chilli. Shankleesh (or shanglishe) are small balls of the cheese rolled in dried herbs and spices and preserved in oil. They are a staple food eaten at most meals.

A refreshing and wholesome base for hot or cold soups, yoghurt is often added at the end of cooking and just heated through to prevent curdling, but is sometimes cooked with the other ingredients, in which case sheep's or goat's yoghurt are preferable as they're less likely to split. In contemporary Western cooking, it is a great, low-fat alternative to cream or sour cream stirred into, or used to garnish, soups. Given yoghurt's acidic nature, it is often used as a marinade, to tenderise and add flavour to meat, as in the marinade used for chicken cooked in the Indian tandoor. It is also used as a sauce for meat, vegetable or pasta dishes in Middle Eastern and Central Asian cooking. Shish barak is lamb-filled pasta served in a yoghurt and mint or coriander sauce, and ashak is Afghani leek-filled pasta coated in a yoghurt sauce flavoured with crushed garlic and cumin.

Creamy yoghurt has obvious applications in desserts as a replacement for cream and cr me fra che. It is a delicious breakfast or dessert spooned over fruit salad and drizzled with honey. The curds drained off buttermilk are a type of yoghurt, popular in desserts throughout Central Asia, the Middle East and Scandinavia. In The Netherlands, these curds are hung in a cloth to drain and eaten on a rusk with sugar and cinnamon. Skyr is a traditional Icelandic dish made from skimmed sheep's or cow's milk curdled with bacteria and rennet—it is served as a dessert with cream, sugar and fruit.

BUYING AND USING

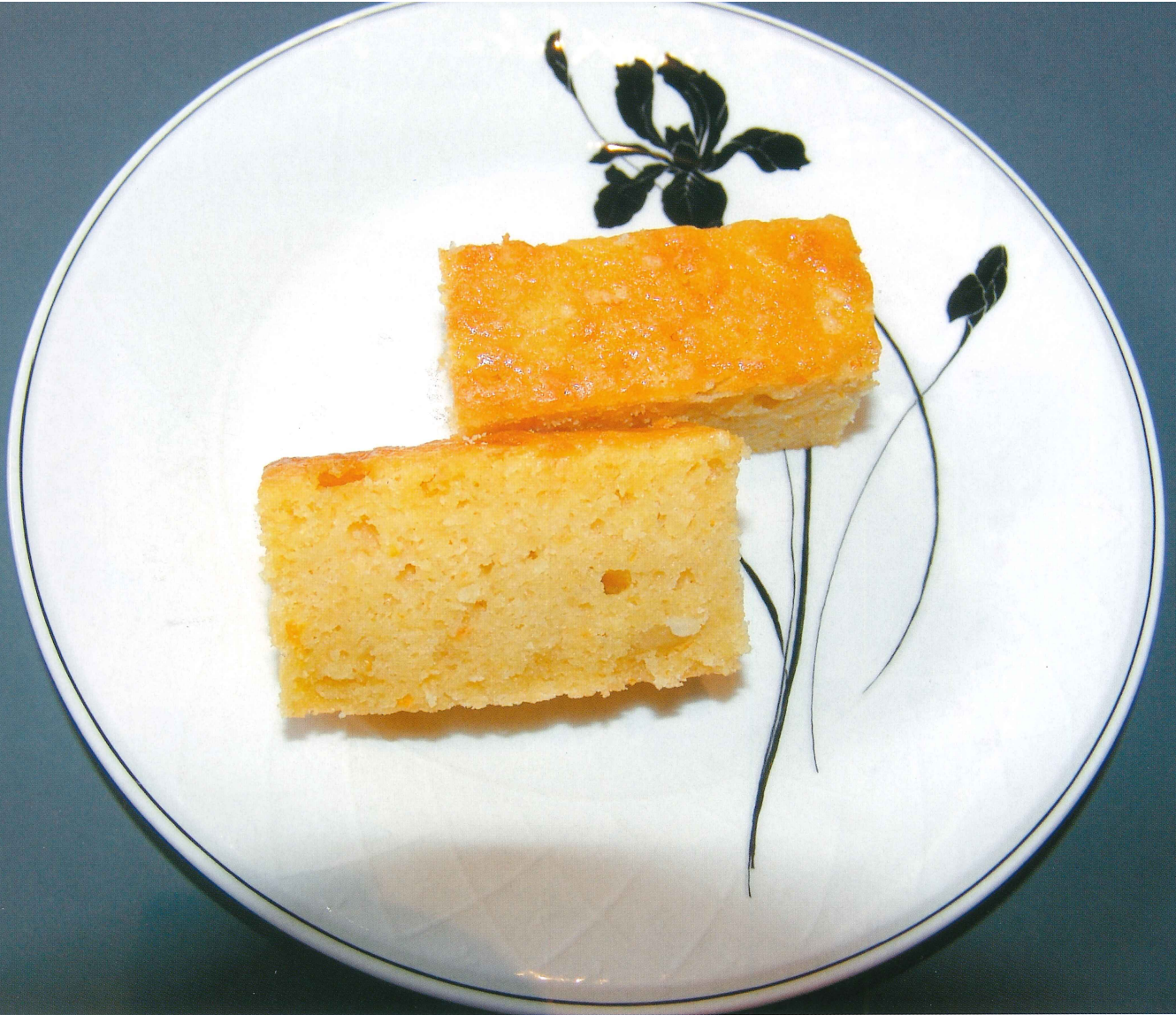
When selecting yoghurt, try to avoid those with added gelatine and flavouring, better to drain yoghurt for a couple of hours to thicken it and to add your own flavouring. Don't stir or break up the fragile curd anymore than necessary, as this will release the whey, causing the yoghurt to split. If cooking with yoghurt, use goat's or sheep's milk yoghurt if possible, with a little salt added, as these are more stable at high temperatures. If heating cow's milk yoghurt, add a little cornflour to help stabilise it, chickpea flour (besan) and/or one egg white per litre of yoghurt can also be used. Heating gradually and moderately, stirring slowly (some say always in the one direction), and leaving the cooking vessel uncovered to prevent condensation, are also important. Try yoghurt as a low-fat substitute for cream, sour cream or buttermilk in your favourite recipe and, for a non-culinary use of yoghurt, apply liberally as a soothing balm to sunburnt skin.

BENEFITS

A diet high in yoghurt has been credited with generating the famed longevity of the Balkan and Caucasian people. In modern times, the 'probiotic' effect of the live cultures in yoghurt has created quite a cult following. Certain strains of lactobacilli have been shown to promote the growth of 'good' bacteria in laboratories, but many remain sceptical as to how far this translates to the human digestive system. Still many people believe that eating live yoghurt helps counter the negative effects of antibiotics and cures many minor stomach ailments.

Drinking yoghurts, traditional in Scandinavia, have become globally popular over the past ten years, based on this theory. It tastes good anyway, so





it can't hurt to try. Certainly lactic acid helps in the assimilation of calcium and phosphorus and, as the bacteria have already broken down much of the lactose, yoghurt is far more easily digestible than milk, which is particularly useful to people with lactose intolerance.

MAKING YOUR OWN YOGHURT

There are various 'yoghurt makers' available, but they aren't necessary. To make your own yoghurt, bring one litre of whole milk to the boil, tip into a sterilised bowl and cool to 45 degrees C (dip your little finger into the milk and if you can just hold it there for ten seconds before it becomes too uncomfortable, the temperature is correct). Mix a tablespoon of live yoghurt into a thin paste with some of the warm milk and stir it into the milk in the bowl (using a scalded wooden spoon), making sure to distribute it evenly. Cover the bowl with plastic film and wrap well in a thick

blanket or some other form of insulation; you want the temperature to remain constant for at least six hours. Put it in a warm place and check after five to six hours. If the milk hasn't set yet, quickly rewrap and check again after another couple of hours. Once it has set, remove the insulation and refrigerate. For a thicker yoghurt, drain in a muslin cloth until it reaches the desired consistency. **WD**

ORANGE, ALMOND & YOGHURT CAKE

serves 12

The almond meal and yoghurt make this a wonderfully moist cake. It will keep well in an airtight container for up to a week, and is also delicious served warm with an extra scoop of creamy yoghurt. Any citrus fruit can be substituted for the blood oranges.

*2 blood oranges
250g butter
330g castor sugar
6 eggs
100g ground almonds
180g thick yoghurt
150g plain flour
75g self-raising flour*

1. Preheat oven to 170 degrees C.
2. Grate zest from oranges and juice them, you'll need 80ml of juice. Set aside.
3. Cream butter, sugar and orange zest in an electric mixer until light and fluffy.
4. Add eggs one at a time, beating to incorporate.
5. Stir in almond meal.
6. Stir in yoghurt and orange juice.
7. Sift combined plain and self-raising flours into the cake mixture and stir to incorporate.
8. Pour into a greased and lined 22cm x 36cm cake tin and bake in 170 degrees C oven for 50 minutes, or until a skewer comes out clean.
9. Cool, slice into squares and serve with tea or coffee.



SPINACH & YOGHURT PIE

serves 4

This is an example of drained yoghurt replacing soft curd cheese. If the yoghurt is very thick, you may only need to drain it for an hour or so, it will always give off some whey when heated so draining overnight is ideal. The longer it is drained, the less risk of having a pie with a soggy base. To this end, squeezing as much liquid as possible from the cooked spinach is also important. You can use 250g frozen spinach (thawed and drained) instead of the baby spinach leaves. Fry leftover wedges of the pie in olive oil until warmed through and serve sprinkled with za'atar (Middle Eastern spice blend of thyme, sesame seeds and salt).

40ml extra virgin olive oil
2 tbsp pine nuts

4 green onions, chopped
300g baby spinach leaves, washed and dried
2 tbsp chopped mint leaves
500g thick yoghurt, drained (or 275g thick labne)
5 sheets filo pastry
sea salt and freshly cracked white pepper
extra olive oil, for brushing

1. Preheat oven to 200 degrees C.
2. Heat olive oil in a large frying pan.
3. Roast pine nuts until golden, remove from oil and set aside.
4. Add green onions to hot oil and sauté for a minute.
5. Add plenty of salt and pepper and spinach leaves and toss in frying pan until just wilted.
6. Remove from heat and squeeze as much liquid as possible out of the spinach.
7. Place spinach, pine nuts, mint and yoghurt in a bowl. Mix well.
8. Brush a round 18-cm removable-base cake tin with olive oil.
9. Brush a sheet of filo pastry with olive

oil and place in the tin, oiled side up. 10. Repeat with another pastry sheet, laying it in the tin across the first sheet (so that the overlapping pastry falls down different sides of the tin). 11. Repeat with remaining pastry sheets. 12. Pour spinach and yoghurt mixture into the pastry shell. 13. Fold overhanging pastry back over the filling, one sheet at a time. 14. Bake in a 200 degrees C oven for 30 - 40 minutes, until pastry is well browned. 15. Serve in wedges with a tomato and olive salad.

OTHER NAMES:

Afghani - maast	Lebanese - laban
Armenian - madzoon	Mongolian - koumis
Danish - yoghurt	Persian - mâst
Dutch - yoghurt	Russian - yaout
French - yaourt	Swedish - yoghourt
German - joghurt	Spanish - yogur
Greek - yiaourti	Turkish - yourt/ yogurtlu
Indian - dahi	
Italian - yog(h)urt	