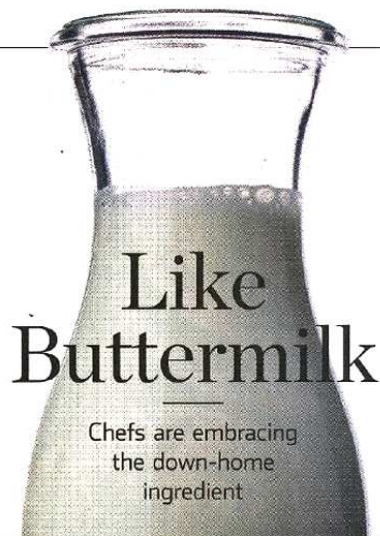


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OFF DUTY

EATING & DRINKING



BY SARAH KARNASIEWICZ

IT'S LIKE THE white Keds sneaker of the kitchen: Plain and old-fashioned as buttermilk may seem, it never really goes out of style. For generations, home cooks have used it as a marinade for fried chicken, a creamy base for salad dressings and a leavener for baked goods. Now, inspired by high-quality, old-school buttermilks that have become easier to get in recent years, chefs are embracing the down-home staple, too, in a slew of creative recipes that range far beyond pancakes, drawing on international and regional-American traditions in ways that not only celebrate the ingredient but elevate it.

"Real buttermilk has such a unique combination of creaminess and acidity—it's just one of these great throwback products," said Matt Jennings, chef-owner of Farmstead in Providence, R.I. Mr. Jennings uses it in his blueberry buttermilk fool, a cool pudding lavished with glossy berries and flecked with mint. "Buttermilk's tartness makes it a great match for sweets, but it's also awesome with smoked or cured fish, or in a custard infused with herbs and drizzled with olive oil," he explained. Indeed, many of Mr. Jennings's favorite uses for it—like a buttermilk-and-sweet-tobacco ice cream, and buttermilk semolina cake with tomato conserva—straddle the line between sweet and savory.

In the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, there's a long history of braising pork in milk until the meat is meltingly tender and the liquid separates into pillow, golden curds. In Georgia, James Beard Award-winning chef Hugh Acheson prefers to swap in buttermilk, for a Southern spin on the Italian classic. Enzymes in the buttermilk tenderize the meat, breaking down its connective tissue and helping to cut its richness with acidity; paired with a shaved fennel, radish and cucumber salad and fresh carrot purée, it makes an all-American farmers'-market meal. "I still love the original recipe," Mr. Acheson said, "but to me you just get a little brighter, rounder flavor from real buttermilk."

And just what is "real" buttermilk? A quick primer: Before the advent of mass-produced, ultra-pasteurized milk, buttermilk was the gently tangy, milky byproduct of churning cream into butter. Today, the "cultured lowfat buttermilk" found in supermarkets is a lowfat or skim milk "soured" by the addition of lactic acid cultures and often bulked up with thickening agents—a puckeringly tart, viscous liquid that's more akin to yogurt than the butterfat-flecked drink of yore. If it's fluffy flapjacks or juicy fried chicken you're after, modern buttermilk can get the job done. But for foods like ice creams, salad dressings and soups that highlight the rich, unadulterated flavor of real buttermilk, it's worth the effort to seek out the old-fashioned stuff at farmers' markets or small dairies.

Or, pick up a copy of the new "Animal Farm Buttermilk Cookbook," by Vermont dairywoman Diane St. Clair, and try your hand at making your own. Ms. St. Clair, who for years has supplied butter to star chefs like Thomas Keller and Barbara Lynch, offers a simple recipe that requires little more than cream, a warm corner in which to let it culture and a food processor. The bonus: You get a fabulous homemade butter in addition to two cups of bracingly fresh buttermilk.

Put that bounty to use in a rustic and restorative chilled soup like the earthy, herb-flecked buttermilk-and-spelt one that chef Cathy Whims serves at Nostrana in Portland, Ore. Or take a page from Mr. Acheson's playbook and let the ingredient shine in a simple dish of strawberries and plain buttermilk garnished with sorghum syrup and black pepper. "You can use it all kinds of ways," he said. "But when you have a great buttermilk, you really just want to show it off."

Chilled Buttermilk and Spelt Soup

ACTIVE TIME: 1¼ hours TOTAL TIME: 2¼ hours (includes chilling)
SERVES: 6

- 6 cups water
- 2 bay leaves
- 3 tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 cup whole grain spelt
- ½ red onion, finely diced
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- ½ teaspoon sweet smoked paprika, plus extra for garnish
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup celery heart, finely chopped
- ¼ cup Italian parsley, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons fresh mint, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon lemon zest, finely chopped
- 6 cups buttermilk
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 bunch chives, chopped
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

WHAT TO DO:

1. In a pot set over high heat, bring water, bay leaves, 2 tablespoons salt and spelt to a boil, stirring occasionally. Once boiling, reduce heat to low and simmer until spelt is tender but still chewy, about 1 hour. Add red onions to pot and continue simmering until onions are tender, 3-5 minutes. Drain and transfer to a large bowl.
 2. Add all remaining ingredients except buttermilk, lemon juice, chives and oil to bowl, and stir to combine. Stir in buttermilk and lemon juice, and adjust seasoning if necessary. Refrigerate at least 1 hour.
 3. To serve, divide soup among six chilled bowls and top each with a pinch of paprika, a sprinkling of chives and a drizzle of olive oil.
- Adapted from Cathy Whims of Nostrana, Portland, Ore.



Buttermilk Braised Pork Shoulder With Carrot Purée and Shaved Fennel, Radish and Cucumber

ACTIVE TIME: 50 minutes TOTAL TIME: 3 hours (includes oven-braising) SERVES: 4-6



- 2 pounds boneless pork shoulder, rolled into a cylinder and tied
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt, plus more to taste
- 5 tablespoons butter
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ yellow onion, cut into ½-inch slices, plus 1 tablespoon minced onion
- ½ head garlic
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 2 cups buttermilk

- Pinch of ground nutmeg
- 1 cup shaved fennel bulb, plus ½ cup fronds
- ½ cup shaved radishes
- ½ cup shaved cucumber
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2½ cups sliced carrots
- 2 cups milk
- 2 teaspoons maple syrup

WHAT TO DO:

1. Preheat oven to 300 degrees.
2. Season pork with 1 teaspoon salt. In a large, lidded dutch oven over medium heat, melt 3 tablespoons butter with 1 tablespoon oil. Place pork in pot and cook until pork is browned all over, about 3 minutes per side.
3. Remove pork from pot and set aside. Add onion slices and garlic to pot and cook until soft and golden,

- 10 minutes. Deglaze pot with stock, scraping up brown bits from bottom. Add buttermilk and nutmeg, then return pork to pot. Bring to a simmer, then cover pot and transfer to oven. Braise until pork is cooked through and tender, about 2½ hours.
4. Meanwhile, make salad: Combine fennel, radishes and cucumbers in a bowl. Season with ¼ teaspoon salt, remaining oil and lemon juice. Set aside at room temperature to macerate.
5. Make carrot purée: In a small pot set over medium heat, bring minced onion, carrots and milk to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer gently until carrots are tender, about 15 minutes. Strain carrots, reserving cooking liquid. Carefully place hot carrots and half of cooking liquid

- in a blender and purée. Add remaining butter, maple syrup and a pinch of salt and purée until smooth. Transfer to a sauce pan and keep warm until ready to serve.
6. When pork is ready, remove from oven. Set pork aside on a cutting board and let rest 5 minutes. Meanwhile, set Dutch oven over high heat and reduce braising liquid by half. (Buttermilk curds will have separated by this point.) Transfer half of braising liquid to blender and purée.
7. To serve, divide carrot purée among four to six plates. Slice pork against the grain and set 1 or 2 slices atop carrot purée. Garnish with salad and drizzle pork with puréed braising liquid. —Adapted from Hugh Acheson of 5 & 10, Athens, Ga.

Blueberry Buttermilk Fool

ACTIVE TIME: 25 minutes TOTAL TIME: 4½ hours (includes chilling) SERVES: 4

- For the sauce:
- 2 cups blueberries
 - 1 teaspoon minced mint
 - ¼ cup sugar
 - Pinch of kosher salt
 - ½ teaspoon lemon zest
 - ½ teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice

- For the pudding:
- ½ cup heavy cream
 - 1 cup buttermilk
 - 1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
 - 1 teaspoon lemon zest
 - 1 teaspoon orange zest
 - ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar
 - ½ teaspoons plain, powdered gelatin
 - 3 tablespoons warm

- water
- Honey, for garnish
 - 4 sprigs mint

WHAT TO DO:

1. Make sauce: In a saucepan set over medium heat, combine ½ cups blueberries, mint, sugar and salt, and cook until bubbling. Reduce heat to medium-low and cook, stirring occasionally, until blueberries are soft, about 5 minutes. Stir in lemon zest and juice. Remove from heat, stir in remaining blueberries and let cool to room temperature.
2. Make pudding: Use an electric mixer to whip

- cream until stiff peaks form. Set aside. In a large bowl, combine buttermilk, lemon juice, citrus zests and sugar. In a small bowl, combine gelatin and water, stirring until gelatin dissolves. Gradually pour gelatin mixture into buttermilk mixture, whisking to combine. Fold in whipped cream.
 3. Divide pudding among four small bowls. Refrigerate until set, 4 hours. To serve, top puddings with sauce, a drizzle of honey and mint sprig.
- Adapted from Matt Jennings of Farmstead, Providence, R.I.



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