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The Latest DIY Craze? Say Cheese (and Other Dairy)

By ALINA DIZIK

A.J. Simone, a 23-year-old account executive at a furniture chain, had tried pickling, canning and bread-making. The next frontier for him: making cheese. "The first time I pressed cheese into a pre-formed mold, it was really satisfying," says Mr. Simone, of Queens, N.Y. He now makes ricotta and dabbles in South Asian *paneer*.

Mozzarella, *chèvre*, yogurt and butter are joining home-made pickles, preserves, bread and beer as do-it-yourself projects that even nonprofessional cooks will try.

Making Mozzarella at Home



John Francis Peters for The Wall Street Journal

To make mozzarella cheese, Christine Hmiel stirs and heats milk and citric acid to 90 degrees. Next, she adds rennet and lets the pot sit for five minutes.

Dairy DIYers include connoisseurs of artisanal foods, as well as back-to-basics crafters like Mr. Simone. "In the past it's been more of the elite foodies," says Carol Blindauer, senior vice president of health and wellness at the National Dairy Council in Chicago. Now she sees a broader group of people trying it out.

Ashley English, author of "Home Dairy," a cookbook published last year, believes one reason for the enthusiasm for dairy-making is that it doesn't require expensive contraptions or hours of time. Most of her recipes—for buttermilk, mascarpone, *crème fraîche* (a thin sour cream) and quark (a soft fresh cheese)—take less than an hour to prepare. Fresh mozzarella can take as little as 30 minutes. "When people see that you can get a carton of heavy whipping cream and get butter in five minutes, they are in a profound state of awe," she says.

Entrepreneurs are targeting amateur dairy makers with kits.

Claudia Lucero began selling Urban Cheesecraft cheese-making kits three years ago. Ms. Lucero, who has a farm share, started experimenting with cheese as a way to preserve the milk she received. Ms. Lucero's kits, first sold on Etsy.com, a marketplace for handmade items, are now also sold at Whole Foods Market stores in the Pacific Northwest region and other gourmet grocers. In November, sales averaged 300 kits per week, up from 70 kits in previous years, says the Portland, Ore.-based entrepreneur.

Each kit includes traditional tools like cheese molds, butter muslin, cheesecloth and a thermometer. Kits for making Indian-style *paneer* or Mexican-style *queso blanco*, mozzarella or fresh ricotta, and goat cheese retail for \$19 to \$29. A mozzarella kit from Roaring Brook Dairy was launched a year and a half ago and is sold at places like Sur la Table and Amazon for about \$21.

Homemade cheeses and yogurts taste richer than their store-bought counterparts and don't have stabilizers or artificial flavors, home dairy makers say. Others see the bacteria in yogurt as providing "probiotic" health

benefits. Cooks use fresh buttermilk for waffles or pancakes, *crème fraîche* for creamy soup or dressings, mozzarella for homemade pizza or pasta, and kefir, a Central Asian yogurt drink, for smoothies.

The most basic fresh cheese, such as ricotta, is made by adding acid to heated milk, which alters the milk's proteins and creates curdling. The curds are then drained and salted to make a variety of cheeses. Thicker cheeses such as mozzarella are made by adding rennet, a group of enzymes traditionally extracted from calf stomachs.

Most cheese recipes recommend using pasteurized milk. There is a risk of unwanted bacteria multiplying, however, especially when enthusiasts use "raw" unpasteurized milk, says Robert Roberts, an associate professor of food science at Pennsylvania State University who teaches courses on ice-cream-making and dairy culturing. Harmful bacteria like *E. coli* and *listeria* are tasteless in milk.

Even without raw milk, each batch is an experiment. "Since most people don't have a way of controlling temperature that accurately, it becomes very difficult to make a consistent product," Mr. Roberts says.

Elizabeth McKinstry, 42, a library assistant in Atlanta, was disappointed by some mozzarella and goat cheese she made this fall. "I've learned it's more art than science," she says. "They can give you instructions, but it's unpredictable."

Some people are dabbling in cultured dairy products, which require bacterial cultures to make foods like yogurt, kefir, buttermilk and more-complex cheese varieties. Lactic-acid starter bacteria are frequently used to turn milk into yogurt by converting lactose, or milk sugar, into lactic acid.

Lisa Imerman, a part-time lawyer from suburban Detroit, has been making her own kefir for the last seven years. After kefir grains containing bacteria are added to milk, the mixture thickens to a gel-like substance. Her kefir tastes less tangy than the store-bought version. She adds fresh fruit and maple syrup to sweeten the drink.

Each new batch of kefir requires grains from a previous batch, which are strained out to restart the fermentation process. The grains "are these little gelatinous blobs that do so much if you just leave them on the counter," says the 40-year-old, who swears by kefir's probiotic benefits. She keeps spare kefir grains in her refrigerator and gives them, along with her cheat sheet on kefir-making, to people who contact her. She welcomes a couple of visitors each month: "I just tell them to bring a glass jar."

Frederic Landmann, 36, a biologist at the University of California in Santa Cruz, saves on costs by making his own yogurt. Every other week, he leaves a gallon pot of milk and yogurt cultures on his stove, which is a vintage type that emits continuous warmth. It takes a day for it to turn into fresh yogurt, which he eats throughout the week. "Yogurt that is good is expensive," says the 36-year-old who uses it to make creamy salad dressings and mixes it into granola.

But for most dairy enthusiasts, it's about the process. Christine Hmiel, a 27-year-old nonprofit employee in Albany, N.Y., attended a party last summer where there was just one request from the host: Each guest needed to bring a gallon of milk. During the party, people took turns straining the curdled milk and eventually created tidy balls of fresh mozzarella and ricotta. There were ten pounds of fresh cheese at the end of the night. It was inspiring, says Ms. Hmiel, who is now experimenting with both types of cheese in her kitchen.

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