



FAKING FRESH + FINDING REAL RICOTTA

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Ricotta will never be my favorite cheese. And this is because, technically, ricotta is not a cheese, but a dairy product. Please understand this is not a complaint, but rather an excellent loophole that allows me, a self-proclaimed cheese lover, to worship ricotta wholly and completely, without interfering with my other cheese interests.

Interestingly enough, my obsession with said not-quite-cheese did not come to fruition in the back hills of Italy, where ricotta flourishes. It started because I had way too much time and a particular craving: lasagna. What I did not want was a slop-it-on-your-plate-overflowing-with-mystery-meat-and-stringy-cheese lasagna. I wanted veggies. And layers of see-through pasta. I wanted something light and delicate: a final product that would induce visions of sugar plum fairies dancing through blossoming vegetable gardens. And I wanted to make it myself.

You see, what can be found on the supermarket shelves in America is not ricotta. It is difficult to pinpoint what exactly those generic plastic containers are filled with, but the lumpy, dense, caustically chemical spread

is not the same product you will find fresh from a dairy farm. Its name (a near perfect translation of the Italian re-cooked) hints at its origins. In the process of making all the primadonna cheeses that Italy is so famous for (the parmigianos, the pecorinos, even the mozzarellas), ricotta was born as a means of salvaging leftovers. The residual liquid from cheese making (whey, to get technical) is re-heated, allowing remaining proteins and solids to coagulate. When strained after cooking, a decisively plump, pure white, pillow-like cloud of ricotta emerges. This is what I was after.

After scouring recipes, I pieced together a vegetable lasagna that required a gently spiced tomato sauce, a ricotta and spinach filling, and heaping layers of fresh pasta sheets. I would

have grown the spinach had I time, but instead I settled on sourcing the basic raw ingredients. Rolling out pasta sheets with a wine bottle? No problem! Finding edible ricotta? Good luck. There was no way I was about to sully this potentially precious dish with store-bought, bastardized, American ricotta. I'd have to make my own.

And I did. Or at least as close as I could get from my cramped Brooklyn apartment, far from the pastures of grazing dairy animals. It only took three galloons of milk and an entire Sunday afternoon. After various batches came away too delicate or too cooked, I finally summited my personal Everest when from the pot emerged a firm but airy, delicately sweet, mound of fresh-ish ricotta. (I say fresh-ish because this method is not authentic to

ricotta making, but definitely one-ups your typical supermarket container.) I could go on to brag about the immortal lasagna that I then produced, but in the interest of honesty I'll tell you this: I no longer cared about lasagna. I just wanted ricotta. I would dish it out like yogurt with a spoon and little else. I put it on top of pasta and mixed it in salads. It moved into condiment world for me. I couldn't not have ricotta.

True ricotta thrives when it is young and fresh. For this reason, the good stuff is typically packaged in a small strainer so that the ricotta can con-

tinue to drain and breathe even when enclosed. It will be smooth, sweet, never salty, and just mellow enough to over-indulge in. Do not be fooled into thinking ricotta is only made of cow's milk. It all depends on what animals are best suited to the various cheese producing regions. Sheep's milk ricotta is particularly gentle on the palate and comfortingly low in fat and high in protein. On the other hand, goat's milk ricotta has a certain earthiness that easily transports you to green, mountainside pastures.

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Three years after my first foray into this non-traditional "homemade" ricotta, I find myself in the motherland of dairy: Italy. Here, it is absolutely unnecessary to attempt any sort of cheese making on one's own (unless accompanied by a professional). The countryside abounds with small-scale cheese producers and even the tiniest of towns has a local cheese shop. I wandered into one of these shops in Siena last week, down a steep hill, away from the maze of ancient streets in the historical center. The window was bare, except for handwritten signs proclaiming meats and cheeses nostrano, our own. A man whose girth hinted at his passion for food greeted me.

"We're having a picnic," I told him, facing the various meats and cheeses in their glass homes. He was not the smiling sort, but quickly sliced off a

truffle-infused pecorino for me to try. I nodded in agreement, and we settled on one other aged pecorino to include. Then I saw the ricotta. Sheep's milk of course, appropriate for the Tuscan hillside. It rested peacefully in its large strainer. "Ricotta?" I wondered aloud. He winked and started to fill a con-

tainer appropriate for a family of ten. I timidly interrupted with, "Well, we are just three for the picnic." "Si, si. Capito," he nodded and smiled, "*Va bene. La ricotta si mangia.*" Yes, yes. Got it. It's fine. Ricotta, you can eat. And we did. All of it. **R**

{THE CLOSEST YOU'LL GET TO} HOMEMADE RICOTTA

Use this ricotta for whatever your heart desires. If you can resist eating it straight from the colander, I recommend topping it on crackers with drizzles of honey, adding it to pasta, or stuffing it graciously into halved figs.

Real ricotta is complex, deriving from the leftover whey of cheese making. Eaten fresh, the taste is indescribable. This recipe will free you from store made atrocities, but for authentic ricotta, come to Italy and find a dairy farmer.

2 cups of fresh whole milk

1 cup of heavy cream or half + half

1 tsp coarse sea salt

Rosemary sprig (optional)

2 Tbsp fresh lemon juice

1. Put all the ingredients (less the lemon juice) on the burner over low heat. Stir gently, only occasionally.
2. Using a candy thermometer, heat mixture to 190°F and remove from heat. (Or, just watch the mixture closely. When it starts to steam and bubble a few times, remove from heat.)
3. Add the lemon juice. Stir twice very gently. Let sit for five minutes.
4. Pour the mixture in a colander lined with cheesecloth over a large bowl. The solids will settle in the cheesecloth. Your ricotta will keep for a couple days covered in the fridge.