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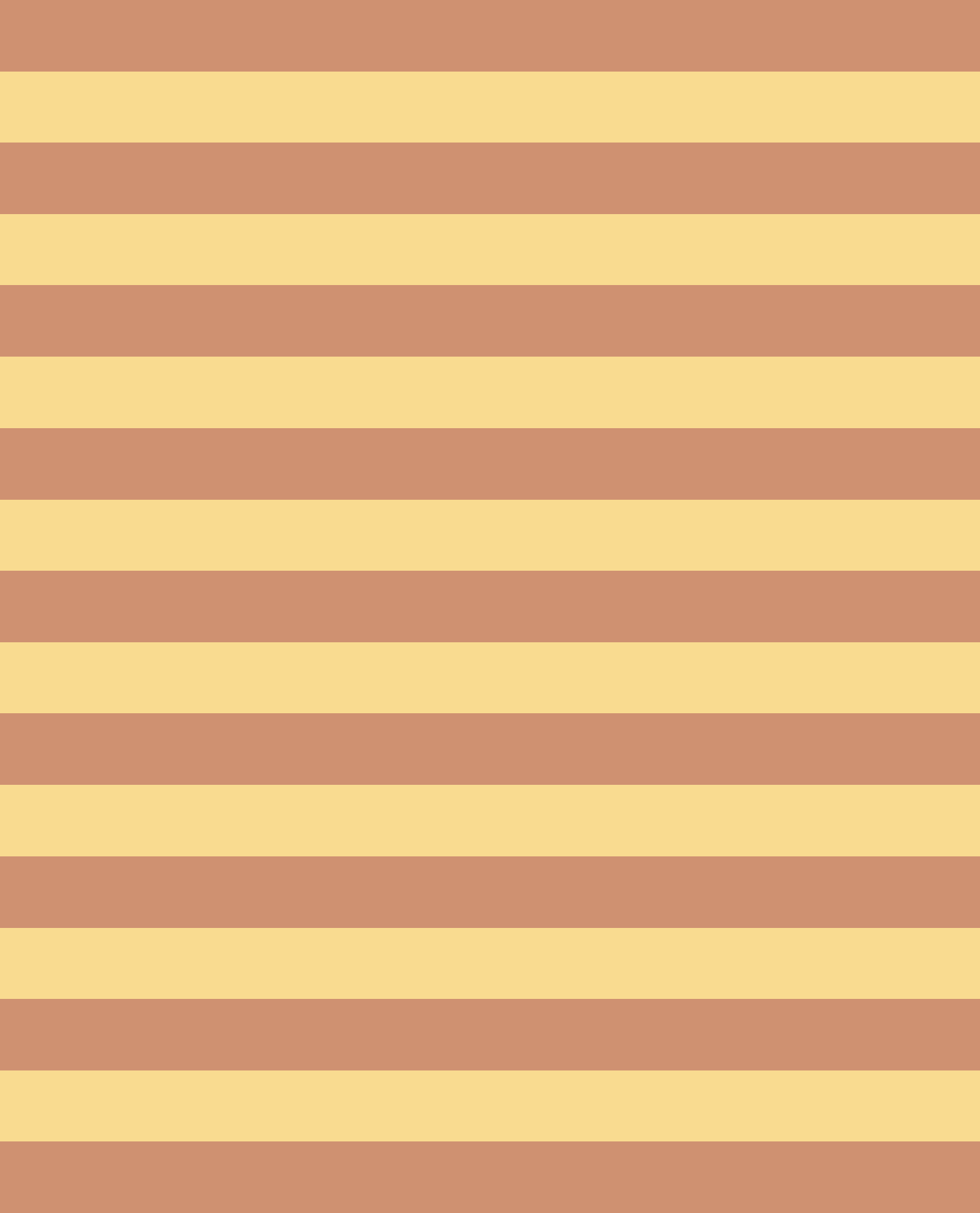
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THE STORY

OF BUTTER

SALTED *or* UNSALTED?

When we buy butter at the supermarket today, for most of us there is only one choice that needs making: salted or unsalted? This is a choice that first started in France, and it's an interesting quirk of history as to why that country ended up with two very distinct butter traditions, which both still live on.

For centuries, the great divide came down to one simple thing: salt. Who had it, who could afford it, and who was forced to pay heavily for it.

Inland regions of France, particularly those around Paris and the central north regions, such as Burgundy, Champagne and parts of Normandy, faced steep salt taxes under the gabelle, a notoriously unfair French tax that was in place from the fourteenth century until its abolition in 1790. It made salt expensive and often inaccessible to many people. As a result, butter was eaten fresh and unsalted, because adding salt for preservation simply wasn't economical. This 'sweet' butter became the foundation of Parisian cuisine and is the reason why so many French pastries call for unsalted butter today.

But the story of butter plays out differently on the country's west coast, where the salty ocean laps the shores. Regions such as Brittany and Pays de la Loire were salt rich. They had abundant access to salt from marshes and, importantly, were mostly exempt from the salt tax. Salt was cheap, plentiful and part of daily life. So, butter there was traditionally salted, for both flavour and preservation. Salting the butter meant it lasted longer, travelled further and developed its own distinct character. The salted butters of Brittany, in particular, became famous for their depth, minerality and keeping quality.

So, the great French butter divide wasn't initially about taste – it was about economics, geography and taxation. Two cultures, two traditions, shaped by something as simple as the price of salt. Those historical divides laid the groundwork for the regional butter styles we recognise today, many of which are now protected under formal French and European classifications.



BUTTER COWS – AND A BUTTER ELVIS

Tibet's monks are not the only people who carve butter. In Renaissance Europe, sculptures made of butter were used for decorating banquet tables and lavish dining occasions by priests and politicians alike. Starting in the Middle Ages, Catholics in Eastern Europe began to form butter into the shape of a lamb for a small Easter table sculpture, hand-shaped or pressed into a mould. Still made today, these lambs stand for the Paschal Lamb, a reminder of Christ's sacrifice on Good Friday, with some families pressing a tiny butter cross on its back to 'mark' the symbol of goodness. Like the Tibetan tormas, the butter lamb is meant to be both seen and shared. It is blessed, admired and then eaten with the holiday meal.

In 1876, a butter bas-relief carving, created by Caroline Shawk Brooks and called *Dreaming Iolanthe*, was shown at Philadelphia's Centennial Exhibition, where it caused a sensation. To keep it intact during its display, it was suspended above a bucket of ice that had to be topped up constantly.

Like many farm women, Brooks churned the family's butter for both home use and to earn money. Instead of relying on the tin moulds that were common then to make hers stand out to customers, she hand-carved shells, animals and faces, often using improvised tools. The novelty and the likenesses drew attention. Commissions followed, including a much-talked-about portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Norma 'Duffy' Lyon became Iowa's premier butter sculptor after 1999, when she made a rendition of *The Last Supper* out of butter. This brought her national attention, but she was also known in America as the 'Butter-Cow Lady' thanks to the tons of US Grade AA salted butter she

sculpted into life-sized cows starting in 1959. Lyon was also known for carving popular celebrities, including Elvis Presley, Garth Brooks and Tiger Woods. In 2007, she came out of retirement briefly to carve a slightly wonky bust of Barack Obama.

State fairs across America still gear up for butter sculpting exhibitions every year. By August, the height of the state fair season, many tons of butter will have been layered over frames of wire and canvas to form artworks such as the Empire State Building, full-size cars, celebrities and, of course, the ever-popular butter cow. The Iowa State Fair has showcased its iconic life-sized butter cow for more than a century, and the Utah, Ohio and Illinois state fairs also treat it as a staple attraction. The spectacle blends craft and dairy education – visitors watch artisans working at refrigerator temperatures, learn about milk, cream and butterfat, and marvel at ephemeral works.



RIGHT *Dreaming Iolanthe* by Caroline Shawk Brooks

The MARGARINE WARS: *the CALL for a SUBSTITUTE*

It was in 1869 that the French government sought out a substitute for butter. A reward was offered to anyone who could create a cheap, stable butter alternative to feed both the army and the poorer classes. Butter’s rise in cultural status had made it less accessible to ordinary people, and its production was still tied to the limits of the seasons.

This rise in butter’s cultural status had taken place around 100 years earlier when the art of butter-making became a royal pastime in France. Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, famously had a rustic retreat built at the Palace of Versailles called the Hameau de la Reine (‘The Queen’s Hamlet’). It had a working dairy, complete with cows, goats and a milking parlour, with a laiterie (dairy room) where fresh milk, cream and butter were served in fine Sèvres porcelain, like a butter tea party. Suddenly, butter was elegant, pastoral and aristocratic.

Before Marie Antoinette, butter in France had been seen largely as a regional, rustic food. But through the Queen’s sudden interest in freshly churned butter, what was once a staple of northern farm kitchens was repositioned as something refined and fashionable for the elite. The Queen, of course, also had quite a penchant for cake – and met her fate with the guillotine in 1793.

Suet, stomach and a bit of udder

In response to the government’s request for a butter substitue, French chemist Hippolyte Mège-Mouriès responded by submitting something he already been working on. He won, which is perhaps no surprise, for his was the only entry!

The inventor noticed that cows kept producing fat in their milk, even when they were undernourished. He guessed the fat must come from the cow’s own body. To mimic this, he chopped up beef suet, mixed in animal stomach and simmered it in slightly alkaline water. The result looked like butter, but the taste wasn’t right. Believing it needed ‘more cow,’ he added chopped udder. This odd experiment became margarine.

He called it oleomargarine – ‘oleum’ for fat and ‘margarite’ for pearl, on account of its pearly sheen. Patented in 1871 and mass-produced by the 1880s, its only real advantage was price – it was cheaper than butter. Although neither the French army nor the poor seemed too keen on the new alternative.

Mège-Mouriès sold his patent to Dutch butter company Jurgens, which would later become part of Unilever. His invention marked the birth of margarine, the first major competitor to butter, especially during times of scarcity and war.

A tax on your spread!

By the late 1890s margarine was spreading across several continents. Passionate lobbying from dairy farmers in the United States led to the instalment of the federal Margarine Act, slapping a tax on margarine and demanding that its manufacturers pay prohibitive licensing fees. Some states placed an outright ban on margarine sales. Margarine had become polarising, not just in the home but politically, too. A Wisconsin senator famously stated that butter should come from the dairy, not the slaughterhouse. ‘I want butter that has the natural aroma of life



and health. I decline to accept as a substitute caul fat, matured under the chill of death, blended with vegetable oils and flavoured by chemical tricks.’ His quote sends chills, as it is so relevant today.

Newspaper cartoonists had a field day, sketching factories tossing everything from stray cats to soap, paint, arsenic and even old rubber boots into the vat to make margarine. At the same time a flood of questionable ‘scientific’ reports warned that the consumption of margarine might cause cancer or lead to insanity.

Pink margarine

By the early 1900s, colouring margarine pink was mooted as a way to distinguish it from the ‘real thing.’ While butter is naturally yellow, thanks to milk’s betacarotene from cows feeding on fresh grass, margarine was made in industrial vats and presented as a sickly shade of grey. Margarine manufacturers were keen to colour this paste yellow, so that it would appeal more to the public. Butter producers were immediately up in arms, claiming yellow margarine was the last straw and an act of fraud and a deliberate ploy to trick the public. With this, pink margarine was imposed by 32 states in America – only to have the law overturned by the Supreme Court on the grounds that it was illegal to enforce food adulteration.

ABOVE A 1952 American Dairy Association advertisement
RIGHT A 1948 advertisement from the National Association of Margarine Manufacturers

The healthy alternative?

By the mid-twentieth century, margarine production shifted from beef tallow to vegetable and seed oils like soybean, sunflower and canola. This change made it cheaper and helped position the spread as a modern product – lighter, more adaptable and marketed as healthier than butter. Because it was lower in saturated fats and free from animal fats, margarine was promoted as the answer to rising heart attacks in the Western world. The media eagerly got behind the movement, hailing margarine as a way to lower cholesterol and protect heart health.

Food companies seized on this opportunity, launching campaigns that painted butter as old-fashioned and even dangerous, while margarine became the slick, scientific alternative. Doctors endorsed it, governments recommended it and families bought into the promise that margarine was the responsible choice. For decades, butter’s reputation suffered.

It wasn’t until much later, when research revealed the dangers of trans fats in hydrogenated margarines, that the pendulum began to swing back. Butter, with its deep roots in tradition and natural simplicity, was ready to reclaim its place – no longer the villain, but once again a food of culture, craft and pure flavour.





Himalayan yak butter

High in the Himalayas, in China and Nepal, yak butter is made from yak's milk cream, churned by hand or using a tall wooden churn. The butter is highly aromatic, with a strong tang and grassy notes that reflect the yak's mountain pasture diet. Its most famous use is in yak butter tea (po cha), made by blending the butter with hot tea and salt to make a warming, calorie-dense drink that helps the locals withstand the harsh cold.

Chinese su-you

In parts of western China, a clarified butter known as su-you is used in traditional pastries and noodles, lending them a distinctive richness. Like ghee, it keeps well at room temperature and is an important cooking fat in regions with limited refrigeration.

Middle-Eastern samna

In Egypt, Sudan and across parts of the Middle East, clarified butter is known as samna (or samneh). Sometimes it is fermented before clarification, resulting in a strong, tangy, cheesy flavour that adds depth to savoury dishes. Spices such as fenugreek or cardamom are occasionally added to create a fragrant, golden cooking fat.



Buffalo milk butter

Though less common than cow's milk butter, buffalo milk butter is a delicacy in parts of Italy. Made from the same milk used for mozzarella di bufala, this butter is almost pure white, with a rich, sweet flavour and a silky texture. It is prized for delicate sauces or simply spread on crusty bread with a pinch of sea salt. Try Delitia Butter and Fattorie Garofalo's Burro di Bufala, both from Italy.

Goat or sheep butter

Less common than cow's butter, but worth the search as these butters have distinctive flavours. Goat butter is pure white and slightly grassy, while sheep butter is sharper and funkier. While less creamy, the overall taste is very prominent, although it can come across as mildly rancid at times. For goat butter, try Caldermeade Farm (Australia), St Helen's Farm (UK) and Delamere Dairy (UK). For sheep butter, try Spring Sheep Milk Co (NZ), Secret Lands Farm (Canada) and Cellagrande (Italy).

Whey butter

Whey butter is not made from cream, but from the fat that rises to the surface of whey during cheese-making. This style of butter is especially common in northern Italy, where it is a natural by-product of the region's famous hard cheeses such as Parmigiano Reggiano and Grana Padano. This deeply flavoured butter has a rich, nutty and slightly cheesy flavour with a less shiny, firmer texture than regular butter. It can vary in colour depending on the type of cheese being produced. Try Vannella Cheese (Australia), Quicke's Lady Prue Whey Butter and Slightly Salted Grass Fed Whey Butter (UK), Longman Farmhouse Whey Butter (UK) and Moinear Whey Cream Butter (USA).

Plant-based butters

Plant-based butters are designed to mimic the flavour, texture and performance of dairy butter, using vegetable fats such as coconut oil, shea butter, sunflower oil or blends of plant oils. Advances in food technology have made them creamier and more convincing than ever, allowing them to spread, melt and even brown much like traditional butter. While some are flavoured and coloured to resemble sweet cream butter, others are cultured with lactic acid bacteria to replicate the tang of cultured dairy butter. Plant-based butters have become a welcome option for vegans and those with dairy allergies.

Engineered butter

Not all butter is made to be eaten on warm bread. Some is made to behave – in factories, in food science labs and on supermarket shelves. Fractionated butter is one of these. This is butter that's been taken apart and separated into – usually two – different fat fractions: olein fats or soft fats, and stearin fats or hard fats. These fats are then put back together in a way that suits industry needs. Think chocolate coatings that won't melt too quickly, spreads that stay soft in the fridge, or baked goods that need a very specific texture, or to stay firm on a warm day.

It's no surprise then that around 99 per cent of the world's commercial bakers use this kind of butter to make their croissants, Danish pastries and pies. Thanks to modern technology, this type of butter is highly reliable and delivers the same result every time – consistent lift, flaky layers and controlled melting. It's predictable, efficient and designed for performance.

But, while fractionation makes for reliable pastry, it comes at the cost of flavour. When those soft olein fats are removed, so is the natural buttery flavour, and the natural colour or betacarotene that was found in a cow's diet.

The stearin fats are the hard fats that give butter its structure and firmness. Their taste is neutral, and they lack colour and don't contain as many of the volatile compounds that sit in softer fats. Essentially, stearin fats are valued for functionality such as giving puff pastry its strength or chocolate coating its ability not to melt.

A baker using pure, unmodified butter must adjust to its seasons: firmer in winter, softer in summer, unpredictable day to day. It is a live product, and their skill lies in sensing the butter's mood and coaxing it into lamination, folding, shaping and baking. It's an art that requires patience and touch.

Engineered butter provides predictability and consistency, much like a bag of sliced white bread. It's designed to behave the same way every time, eliminating the variables that challenge a baker's craft. It offers speed, reliability and less waste – qualities prized in commercial kitchens.

Fractionated butter is the baker's friend for control and convenience, but the artisan's enemy when it comes to flavour and soul.



MAKING *your own* BUTTER

...

There is something deeply grounding about making butter at home. It's a simple act – cream plus movement plus time – but one that connects you instantly to centuries of dairy craft. Making butter is one of the most satisfying kitchen skills you can learn and, when you make it yourself, you will find you are more conscious of not wasting it!

When it comes to making butter at home, you need only consider three simple things: freshness of cream, flavour through salting, and storage.

Making butter all starts with choosing the right cream. Good butter can only come from good cream. For home churning, look for pure fresh cream with a fat content of at least 35 per cent (see page 41 for suitable creams). The higher the fat, the better the yield and the richer the flavour. I always recommend using pure pasteurised cream with nothing added – no gums, no stabilisers, no thickeners. The cleaner the cream, the cleaner and brighter your butter will taste.

Avoid ultra-pasteurised cream, which has been heated to very high temperatures and won't whip well. It tends to stay stubbornly liquid or turns greasy instead of forming proper butter granules.

Also avoid 'thickened cream,' which often contains gelatine or vegetable gums to give it body. Those additives interfere with the whipping process and affect the texture of the finished butter.

Freshness matters, too. Cream that's very old or close to its expiry date won't whip or separate as predictably. If you're making cultured or kefir butter, in particular, be sure to use cream that has plenty of life left in it so the fermentation has room to develop flavour without tipping into sourness.

Once the butter forms, it is washed in very cold water until the liquid runs clear. This removes any residual buttermilk, helping the butter last longer and taste fresher.

Don't be afraid of the process. Butter wants to happen – it's simply a matter of taking cream a little further than whipped cream. With the right ingredients and a bit of patience, homemade butter is one of the great kitchen pleasures.

Once you have fresh butter in your hands, the next question is always the same: to salt or not to salt? Unsalted is great for baking and for tasting the pure flavour of the cream. But salt brings the butter to life – enhancing richness, balancing sweetness and extending the shelf life slightly. Start with 0.8–1.5 per cent salt by weight and adjust to your taste. You can even go a step further and use rock salt or salt flakes for texture, or coloured salt such as pink or black sea salt for an eye-catching look.





Butter pilaf with almonds and sultanas

This pilaf is all about contrasts – buttery grains of rice, sweet pops of sultanas and the crunch of almonds. It's a side dish that often steals the show. You can swap the almonds for pistachios, and the sultanas for dried apricots or dates. The turmeric is optional – it's just here for its vibrant colour.

• • • SERVES 4-6 • • •

400 g (2 cups) basmati or long-grain rice
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 small onion, finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, minced
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon ground turmeric (optional)
875 ml (3½ cups) hot chicken or vegetable stock
60 g (½ cup) sultanas
60 g (½ cup) slivered almonds, lightly toasted
chopped parsley or coriander (cilantro) leaves, to serve

Rinse the rice under cold water until the water runs clear. Soak in a bowl of water for 15 minutes, then drain well.

Melt the butter in a heavy-based saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion and cook for 5 minutes or until soft and translucent. Stir in the garlic, cinnamon, cumin and turmeric (if using), and cook until fragrant. Add the rice and stir to coat in the buttery spices.

Pour in the hot stock and bring to the boil. Stir in the sultanas, reduce to the lowest heat, cover tightly and cook for 15 minutes. Remove from the heat and leave covered for 10 minutes to finish steaming.

Fluff the rice gently with a fork, fold in the almonds and season with salt and pepper. Garnish with parsley to serve.



Miso butter fudge

One of my favourite TV chefs is UK-based James Martin – if the world were ever to appoint a butter ambassador, he'd surely be at the front of the queue. This recipe is inspired by one of his. When our house is craving something sweet, this is my go-to. The combination of caramel cultured butter and miso hits every note – rich, silky and just salty enough to keep you coming back for another piece ... and another!

▪ ▪ ▪ MAKES 20 PIECES ▪ ▪ ▪

- 397 g (14 oz) tinned sweetened condensed milk
- 450 g (1 lb) light brown sugar
- 125 g (4 oz) unsalted butter
- 125 ml (½ cup) full-cream (whole) milk
- 2 tablespoons white miso paste
- 175 g (6 oz) white chocolate, broken into small pieces
- 1 teaspoon sea salt

Line a 20 cm (8 in) square baking tin with baking paper, letting it overhang the sides.

Place all the ingredients except the salt in a large non-stick saucepan. Bring to a rolling boil and cook for about 10 minutes, stirring constantly, until the temperature reaches 112–114°C (234–237°F) on a sugar thermometer.

Take off the heat, and add the white chocolate pieces. Stir the mixture gently until the chocolate is melted. Cool for 2 minutes, then whisk vigorously by hand for 1 minute before pouring the mixture into the tin. Sprinkle with the sea salt and leave to cool and firm at room temperature for 2 hours.

Cut the fudge into squares in the tin and use the paper to help you lift out the pieces.

Store the fudge in an airtight container for up to 2 weeks, in the fridge for 3–4 weeks, and up to 3 months in the freezer.

Variation

Peanut butter miso: Add 2 tablespoons of smooth peanut butter at the same time as the miso paste to add an extra layer of salty flavour.