

# got buttermilk?

*a fresh take on a southern classic*

*by kevin gillespie . photos by angie mosier*





CHEF GILLESPIE PREPPING HIS CORNBREAD AND BUTTERMILK DISH. OPPOSITE: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) ROASTED CIPOLLINI ONIONS, SKILLET CORNBREAD, THE COMPLETED RECIPE

if

YOU'RE ANYTHING LIKE ME, YOU MIGHT HAVE A GRANDPARENT OR GREAT-GRANDPARENT who had a taste for buttermilk, but you wouldn't go near the stuff yourself. Or maybe you tried a sip of it by accident, thinking it was real milk, and spit it out in a fit of confusion or disgust. What you might not realize is that the buttermilk you tried probably wasn't real buttermilk at all. Once you taste the real stuff—the byproduct of quality milk from healthy cows who have been feeding in open pastures and nothing else, with no added chemicals or artificial thickeners—your entire opinion of buttermilk will change and a world of cooking possibilities will open up for you.

Growing up in the mountains of South Carolina and North Georgia, buttermilk was in our kitchen every day. The older generations had dairy cows and always had a lot of buttermilk left over after making butter. Some of them even liked to drink it. Not me. I didn't know any kids who had a taste for buttermilk, and I was no exception.

But that all changed recently. Last September, my wife and I went to Blackberry Farm in northeast Tennessee on our anniversary, and I was talking to Joseph Lenn, the chef there, who said, "Have you tried this?" He handed me a mason jar of buttermilk from Cruze Farm, a dairy in Knoxville. He made such a point of giving me some to try, I had to taste it. I drank it straight, maybe a quarter jar full, and my first thought, after

marveling at how incredibly good it was, was "How are we going to get this to Atlanta?" Fortunately enough, Suzanne Cruze soon reached out to some chefs in Atlanta to gauge interest and now makes routine deliveries.

The difference between the buttermilk from Cruze Farm and the buttermilk on most store shelves is that the Cruze buttermilk is the real thing. And it dawned on me that I had never tried real buttermilk before since I'd rejected it so vehemently as a child. It's sweet with a natural, almost citrus, acidity. Most of the buttermilk in supermarkets, by contrast, tastes like chemicals, and that's because it is created artificially. But to understand that, you need to understand what real buttermilk is.

Real buttermilk is the natural byproduct of making butter—it's the leftover creamy liquid after the butter itself has been churned out. Often it has tiny bits of butter floating in it and is naturally pretty fatty. Then it goes through a fermentation process, similar to the creation of yogurt. The result is a combination of creamy, fatty liquid with a slight acidity that can work miracles in cooking.

Industrially processed buttermilk, on the other hand, shares some basic attributes on the surface, but the process is artificial, and it shows in the taste. They take low-grade milk, add cultures to make it more acidic, heat it to force a fermentation process, and then thicken it artificially with additives. Our palates aren't as perceptive as we like to believe, but the palate can tell a difference between a natural acidity and something that's been chemically modified to taste sour. It's like the difference between eating a lemon and eating a lemon candy. One has a natural citrus acidity and the other is citric acid. Commercial buttermilk technically has the acidity required for things like baking, where you're using the acid in buttermilk to create a chemical reaction to activate the baking soda. That's why buttermilk makes your biscuits and pancakes fluffier, and commercial buttermilk will work for that purpose. You just wouldn't want to drink it or cook with it beyond that.

I think that's the reason why buttermilk hasn't been widely used for so long. Even great Southern chefs would turn their noses up at it because what was on the market wasn't very good. It's only out of the resurgence of people like Cruze Farm, small dairies making the real product, that people are suddenly realizing, "Oh! I get it!" As for any concern that real buttermilk is "bad for you" because of its high fat content, well remember that it's buttermilk, so it's not like you're drinking a gallon a day. In my opinion, moderation is everything. A little bit of high-quality, all-natural fat in your cooking in its unadulterated form, I would argue, is exponentially healthier for you than any number of "lighter foods" produced by manufacturers.

The following buttermilk recipes are a little more avant-garde than the traditional buttermilk recipes for biscuits and fried chicken, for example, but they're a great way to showcase this key Southern ingredient that is finally receiving the hype it deserves.

## OLD FASHIONED CORNBREAD AND BUTTERMILK WITH SPRING ONIONS

As a kid I remember watching my Granny take leftover cornbread from the night before, crumble it up in a bowl, then pour buttermilk over it with a little bit of sliced onion, and she'd eat that for breakfast like a breakfast cereal. I remember thinking how incredibly weird that was. The rest of us were gobbling down what we considered a traditional breakfast, so there was plenty to eat, yet she chose to eat this strange cornbread, buttermilk, and onion combo. It turns out that was a fairly common dish for people to eat in rural areas. They were raised not to waste anything, so they took the leftover cornbread and mixed it with the leftover buttermilk. It was an acquired taste, but one my Granny loved. I've taken the idea for that dish and changed the components only slightly. It's the "2.0 version" of Granny's, very savory to say the least. I sweetened the cornbread a little bit, which is like sacrilege in the South, but the end result has a flavor and texture that is quite nice.



### Cornbread

4 ounces vegetable oil or lard  
4 cups fine white cornmeal, preferably J.T. Pollard brand  
1 cup all-purpose flour  
3 teaspoons salt  
5 teaspoons baking powder  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
1 tablespoon sugar  
4½ cups buttermilk, plus more for serving  
2 eggs beaten  
5 ounces butter, melted

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees and place 2 10-inch cast iron pans into oven, each filled with 2 ounces vegetable oil or lard. Allow pans to preheat along with oven.
2. Combine all dry ingredients together in a large mixing bowl.
3. Whisk together buttermilk and eggs.
4. Combine wet ingredients with dry, and add melted butter.
5. Adjust consistency of batter with additional buttermilk until the mixture resembles thick pancake batter.
6. Pour mixture into preheated cast iron pans and bake until golden brown and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, 45–55 minutes.
7. Remove from pan and set aside to cool.

### Onions

4 tablespoons butter, divided  
20 cipollini or other small onions, peeled  
30 small green onions, sliced, white and green parts divided  
Salt to taste  
2-inch piece of ginger  
1 tablespoon sugar  
1 cup vegetable stock  
1 cup toasted cornbread crumbs

1. Melt half of the butter in a heavy-bottomed skillet and allow to lightly brown.
2. Add the cipollini onions to the pan and allow to roast, turning once, until deep brown on each side.
3. Remove onions from the heat and season with salt. Set aside to use later.
4. Add the white portion of the green onions and cook until the liquid in the pan has almost evaporated. The onions should be bright green and glazed in the remaining liquid. Remove from heat and set aside.
5. To serve, arrange 2 pieces of cipollini along with 3 pieces of glazed green onion in each bowl. Top with a large pile of sliced green onion greens. Place a wedge of the reserved cornbread in each bowl and sprinkle in toasted cornbread crumbs. Pour in fresh buttermilk, just to cover the bottom of each bowl. Serve.

*Yield: 10 servings*



## BUTTERMILK MARINATED FENNEL WITH SATSUMAS AND JALAPEÑOS

This dish is included in my *Fire in My Belly* cookbook. It was a bit of an experiment combining ingredients that I love (oranges and fennel), and buttermilk was a key element in pulling the flavors together for several reasons. First, I wanted to use buttermilk's mellow creaminess in combination with the satsumas, sort of like a creamsicle effect. Second, I was going for the subtle acidity of buttermilk instead of the harsh acidity of vinegar or the bright acidity of more orange juice or lemon juice. Third, the fattiness of the buttermilk breaks down the structure of the fennel, softening it. And finally, the rich milkiness of the buttermilk tempers the heat from the jalapeño. So it really capitalizes on many of buttermilk's strengths and makes a really tasty dish.



- 1 fennel bulb (baseball size) with fronds
- ½ cup buttermilk
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 satsuma oranges
- 2 scallions
- 1 garlic clove, peeled
- 1 jalapeño pepper
- Olive oil for finishing (a few drops)
- ¼ cup fried croutons\*

\* You can make your own croutons by taking day-old Italian or sourdough bread, slicing it, then cubing it. Heat the cubes in olive oil over medium-high heat in a sauté pan for a few minutes until brown. Remove to a paper towel and sprinkle with salt. Homemade croutons have a short shelf life, so use right away.



- 1.** Rinse the fennel, then remove and reserve the fronds. Slice the bulb in half lengthwise (north pole to south pole). Using a sharp knife, carve around the core, removing and discarding it. Shave the fennel bulb on a mandoline.
- 2.** Mix buttermilk and salt in a medium bowl until the salt dissolves. Toss fennel in buttermilk, cover, and refrigerate. The buttermilk marinade will be very salty, which helps to draw water out of the fennel, and it's the only component in the salad that is seasoned.
- 3.** Cut the oranges into supremes (retaining the flesh of the orange but removing the membrane of each wedge). Combine the juice and segments in a bowl and reserve.
- 4.** Separate the whites from the green stems of the scallions. Trim and discard the roots. Slice the whites into thin rings and put in small bowl. Thinly slice the greens on the diagonal and put in another small bowl.
- 5.** Shave the garlic and jalapeño on the mandoline. Gently toss the scallion whites, garlic, and jalapeño with the satsumas and juice to combine.
- 6.** Pick the fennel fronds from the stems and toss with the scallion greens and a few drops of olive oil. Pluck the shaved fennel from the buttermilk and drain on a paper towel, patting off the buttermilk.
- 7.** For each plate, place a 4-inch ring mold in the center of the plate. Pack the mold with one quarter of the fennel, pressing with the back of a spoon to compact. Layer one quarter of the orange mixture on top of the fennel, gently shaping it into the ring mold. Carefully lift the mold straight up to remove it from the plate. Sprinkle with the fennel frond mixture and croutons.

*Yield: 4 servings*





## BUTTERMILK ICE CREAM

There is an old-fashioned recipe for buttermilk ice cream that I first had as a kid, one that we always used to make at home. I took that recipe and sweetened the buttermilk. Once you sweeten buttermilk, the flavor becomes really amazing. I always thought as a kid that buttermilk ice cream tasted sort of lemony, like a lemon sherbet, but it also has a sharpness and a rich creaminess to it.

6 egg yolks, beaten  
1 ounce fresh lemon juice  
3 cups buttermilk  
2 cups heavy cream  
1½ cups granulated sugar  
Zest of 1 lemon  
Zest of 1 lime  
1 pinch kosher salt  
1 vanilla bean, seeds scraped out  
¼ teaspoon butter flavor extract

- 1.** Whisk lemon juice into beaten egg yolks until pale and fluffy, and set aside.
- 2.** In a medium saucepan over medium heat, combine buttermilk, heavy cream, sugar, citrus zest, salt, vanilla, and butter flavor extract, and stir until the sugar is dissolved.
- 3.** Continue to heat, stirring regularly, until mixture almost reaches a boil.
- 4.** Remove from heat, and vigorously whisk 1 cup of cream mixture into egg mixture to temper.
- 5.** Return pan to heat, and slowly pour the egg mixture into cream mixture, again whisking vigorously.
- 6.** Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium-low, and cook, stirring constantly and making sure to scrape the bottom and sides of pan until mixture thickens enough to coat the back of a spoon.
- 7.** Strain the mixture into a bowl, press plastic wrap down onto surface to prevent a skin from forming, and refrigerate overnight.
- 8.** Whisk chilled mixture to combine, transfer to ice cream freezer, and freeze according to manufacturer's directions.

*Yield: About 1 quart*



## FRAMISH PIE (FRENCH COCONUT AND AMISH BUTTERMILK HYBRID)

Coconut custard pies, in my opinion, are usually too sweet, so I decided to temper that overt sweetness with the complexities of buttermilk. To achieve that effect, I basically combined two very different recipes. First, I had this strong memory of a really, really sweet pie that I used to enjoy at an Amish Mennonite restaurant in South Georgia as a kid. I used that as a base. Then I took another pie that my mom makes, that has always been my favorite, but is a very heavy pie, very dense (and not to everyone's liking, especially those not fond of coconut). By combining the two and using buttermilk with its light lemony acidity, I was able to make a lighter and less sweet version. The great thing is that this is a very simple pie to make because you just add one ingredient at a time into the mixer, then it pours out like batter and bakes right up.

½ cup salted plugra butter, softened\*

\*Plugra butter has a higher butterfat content than most butter and is available at specialty food stores.

1½ cups sugar

3 eggs, beaten

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/8 teaspoon almond extract

3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 pinch salt

1 cup buttermilk

Zest of ½ lemon

1 cup toasted, unsweetened coconut

2 7-inch store-bought, all-butter pie shells

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Beat the butter and sugar together until light.
3. Add the eggs and beat; then beat in vanilla and almond extracts.
4. Sift flour and salt together and add to the batter alternatively with the buttermilk; beat until smooth. Add lemon zest and coconut and mix just to combine.
5. Divide between two pie shells and bake at 400 degrees for 10 minutes, then reduce heat to 350 degrees and bake for 30–40 additional minutes.
6. Pie should turn a nice golden brown when ready and a toothpick inserted should come out clean.

*Yield: 2 pies*

## GET YOUR BUTTERMILK

TLP recommends the following Southern dairies for quality buttermilk products

**CRUZE DAIRY FARM** : Knoxville, TN

[cruzefarmgirl.com](http://cruzefarmgirl.com)

**HAPPY COW CREAMERY** : Pelzer, SC

[happycowcreamery.com](http://happycowcreamery.com)

**JD COUNTRY MILK** : Russellville, KY

[jdcountrymilk.com](http://jdcountrymilk.com)

**M AND M DAIRY** : Westminster, SC

[mandmdairy.com](http://mandmdairy.com)

**MILKY WAY FARM** : Starr, SC

[scmilkywayfarm.com](http://scmilkywayfarm.com)

**OCHEESE CREAMERY** : Grand Ridge, FL

[ocheesecreamery.com](http://ocheesecreamery.com)

**SHUMPERT'S DAIRY** : Leesville, SC

[shumpertmilk.com](http://shumpertmilk.com)

**SOUTHERN SWISS DAIRY** : Waynesboro, GA

[southernswissdairy.com](http://southernswissdairy.com)

**SPARKMAN'S CREAM VALLEY** : Moultrie, GA

[sparkmanscreamvalley.com](http://sparkmanscreamvalley.com)

**STRYK JERSEY FARM** : Schulenburg, TX

[texascheese.com](http://texascheese.com)

**WRIGHT DAIRY** : Alexandria, AL

[wrightdairy.com](http://wrightdairy.com)