

Traveling with Jewish Taste

It's Shavuot. Got Milk?

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



Shavuot is just around the corner, and I'm already thinking of ways to milk it for maximum deliciousness. (I know, cheesy line.) Shavuot is the holiday on which we traditionally eat lots of dairy. But why? The rabbis give a plethora of explanations for the custom. Herein are just a few I have chosen to rationalize my indulging in cheese blintzes and cheesecake.

First, of course, is the most obvious explanation for those of us not heavily versed in scripture. The Torah tells us in Exodus 3:8 that the Promised Land was "flowing with milk and honey," and in Song of Songs 4:11 that "milk and honey are under your tongue."

Those looking for signs in the words of the Torah may find a cosmic mandate to eat dairy since the initials of the four Hebrew words in Numbers 28:26 (*minha hadasha laShem bi'shavuotaychem*) that describe the sacrificial meal offering on Shavuot, spell *mei halav* (from milk). This, of course, suggests that cheese blintzes are a necessary item for the spring festival menu.

If you happen to like *gematria* (numerology), you will be thrilled to see that the numerical equivalent of the word *halav* (milk) is 40 (*het=8, lamed=30, vet=2*). This correlates to the number of days Moses spent on Mount Sinai while awaiting receipt of the Ten Commandments, as well as to the number of years the Israelites wandered in the desert before arriving at the Promised Land.

Some scholars like to have a bit of fun with wordplay. In the Book of Psalms (68:16), Mount Sinai itself is also called *har gavnunim*, or mount of majestic peaks. *Gavnunim* sounds like *g'vinah*, or cheese. Hence, dairy for Shavuot.

The most scholarly interpretation is one that explains that the Israelites, once having accepted the Torah and its commandments, could no longer eat meat that wasn't kosher. So, until they could *kasher* some meat and get new utensils (there was no Crate and Barrel nearby), dairy was all they had.

The irony of all this is that Jews and dairy tend not to get along, intestinally speaking. We of the Tribe are disproportionately missing the enzyme that digests lactose, so we should probably be getting a sponsorship from the Lactaid people to help finance our dairy-laden groaning boards at Shavuot.



Delicious labneh

Labneh with Za'atar

Makes enough for a party appetizer

Back in the days of our forebears, milk would have gone bad quickly without pasteurization or refrigeration, so our Israelite ancestors probably ate something like labneh, the strained yogurt that is so popular on today's mezze platter.

There's no need to buy pre-made labneh when preparing it from scratch is so easy and so delicious (and will so impress your friends).

Labneh Ingredients:

1 quart plain Greek yogurt (Hey, it's a holiday – go for full-fat.)
1 teaspoon salt
Za'atar
Olive oil

Directions:

Stir the salt into the yogurt

Spoon the yogurt mixture into a strainer with a double lining of cheesecloth that has been placed over a bowl.

Draw up the cloth and tie it with a string, rubber band, or twist tie.

Place in refrigerator for 24-36 hours, letting all the liquid drip into the bowl.

Spoon the labneh from the cheesecloth onto a plate and spread out to the edge (make sure to use a plate with a lip).

Drizzle olive oil over the top.

Sprinkle za'atar over all.

Serve with pita chips.

Pita Chips with Za'atar Ingredients:

4 large pieces pita bread – white or whole wheat
2 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons za'atar
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper

Directions:

Pre-heat oven to 350 degrees and line two baking sheets with foil. Spray with cooking spray and set aside.

Using a pair of kitchen scissors, trim the folded edge of the pita bread, then cut into eight triangles, yielding sixteen chips per round of bread.

In a large bowl, toss the triangles with olive oil and then sprinkle with za'atar, salt and pepper.

Place the pita triangles in an even layer on two baking sheets.

Bake until golden brown and crispy, about 10-12 minutes.

Serve immediately with the labneh and/or other dips, or store in an airtight container for up to 5 days.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.