

RAISING HALLOUMI



Halloumi is widely acknowledged as the national cheese of Cyprus, the birthplace of Aphrodite.

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Halloumi is a stretched curd cheese (what the Italians call pasta filata), a distant cousin of mozzarella. But with halloumi, the curds are worked more rigorously to expel more whey, resulting in a firmer, longer-lasting cheese.

Derived from the Greek word *almi* (which means salty), halloumi is traditionally made from either sheep's milk or a blend of sheep's and goat's milk, seasoned with mint leaves and soaked in brine. It is white with the springy, fibrous texture typical of stretched curd cheeses, and has a mellow, slightly lactic flavour with a delicate tang and slight saltiness from the brine in which it is stored.

Halloumi is the cheese of Cyprus (both the Turkish north and the Greek south), where it appears at almost every meal. Alan Davidson, in *The Oxford Companion to Food*, says that the word halloumi comes from Coptic, the language of ancient Egypt. This suggests that its origin may

not have been in Cyprus, or at least that this style of cheese was also made elsewhere and that the Coptic name travelled to Cyprus.

Some say halloumi was first made by the Bedouin tribes, which seems possible, given that it is a long-lasting cheese, suitable for travelling. Today, it is enjoyed throughout the Middle East, known as halloumi in Cyprus and Greece, *hâlûm* in Egypt, *hellim* in Turkey and often simply as 'kebab cheese' in the Lebanon. In the United States, halloumi is a registered trademark and can refer only to the cheese made in Cyprus.

Farmhouse halloumi is still made from the raw milk of sheep and goats that graze the wild, herb-covered Cypriot hillsides, and in villages surrounding the Avdhimou area between the Limassol and Paphos districts. It is now often produced in large factories from a blend of predominantly cow's milk (which is less affected by seasonal changes), goat's or sheep's milk. Handmade traditional halloumi is never pasteurised whereas the commercial varieties are.

There are two pending applications before the European Union to have the name assigned Protected Designation of Origin status. But there is a stumbling block: one applicant wants to allow the inclusion of cow's milk; the other argues that the name should be limited to cheese made only from sheep's and goat's milk.

Cypriot life revolves around this cheese as it is enjoyed at all hours and in various preparations and with diverse accompaniments. It can be part of a salad, paired with chilled watermelon, an addition to any dish, or grilled and fried as the central ingredient of a main course.

Production

Once the milk has coagulated into curds and whey, the curds are finely cut, stirred and pressed between plates for 30 minutes to an hour to encourage draining. The cheese mass is then divided into portions, which are immersed in hot water (90-93 degrees Celsius), melting the curds into a thick, fibrous, pliable mass, firming them, reducing moisture and acid development.

This elastic mass is then kneaded and stretched by hand or machine, pulled into long threads until it is smooth and shiny. The elastic, fibrous cheese

is then rolled out like pastry, dry salted (this is the stage where the salt is often mixed with mint leaves) and cut into small blocks. Some say the mint is simply for flavouring; others claim it has antibacterial properties.

The cheese is ready to be eaten immediately or can be aged for a month to make it drier and harder. It is stored in brine, which keeps it well. Traditional halloumi is semicircular in shape, weighing about 250g and with a fat content of 25 per cent wet weight, making it a healthier choice than many other higher fat cheeses. Firmer, and less brittle, halloumi is also less salty than feta. It can be sliced but never crumbled.

Buying and storing

Halloumi is typically bought in individual plastic pouches surrounded by a little brine. This gives it a good shelf life, making it a great standby to have in the fridge for a quick entrée or snack.

An unopened pack will last for a year under refrigeration and it can also be frozen. More mature halloumi is sold loose from large buckets of brine. Halloumi will keep well as long as it is immersed in brine, but will sour within a few days once removed.

So, either eat your halloumi when it is fresh or let it age for a month.

Using

Halloumi is sliced and eaten cold as a rubbery, squeaky, white cheese with olives, tomatoes and bread for breakfast, often with slices of cold



watermelon in the summer; or perhaps with grilled figs.

It is at its best fried or grilled, the cooking it receives during its manufacture makes it ideal for this treatment as it holds its shape and does not melt, but forms a crisp, golden outer skin with a soft interior when cooked until brown. Cooked this way, it needs nothing but a squeeze of lemon and a grind of black pepper. It can also be draped over a bed of salad greens, such as peppery rocket.

The mature, drier halloumi is often grated to top casseroles or used in stuffed pasta. A typical Cypriot mezze dish, halloumi and lounza, consists of chunks of halloumi layered between slices of smoked pork or soft lamb sausage and grilled. ■

BARBEQUED HALLOUMI SKEWERS WITH PARSLEY AND PRESERVED-LEMON SALSA

Serves 4 as an entrée

Ingredients

500g halloumi
24 mint leaves
8 bamboo skewers
olive oil, for brushing

Salsa

½ cup finely chopped parsley
½ small red onion, finely chopped (about ½ cup)
2 tbsp finely chopped preserved lemon
1 tbsp lemon juice
2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
freshly ground black pepper

1. Make the salsa. Combine all ingredients and set aside until needed.
2. Cut the halloumi into 2cm square cubes.
3. Thread 4 pieces on each skewer with a mint leaf between each cube; if the mint leaves are large, fold them in half.
4. Heat a BBQ, chargrill or heavy frying pan.
5. Brush the cheese generously with olive oil and cook, turning until each side is golden.
6. Serve with salsa on the side and an extra wedge of lemon.

