

The Whey of It



By some definitions, ricotta is not a cheese

, as it's made from whey rather than fermented milk. The name literally means 're-cooked', as the leftover whey from cheese making is reheated, sometimes with the addition of a small amount of fresh milk, until the remaining protein coagulates and rises to the surface. This is then collected and drained and becomes the delicate, eggy, creamy 'cheese' we know as ricotta. It can be made from the whey of cows', goats' or ewes' milk and is popular in various forms around Italy, but is traditionally more common in the south.

In the reclaimed marshland around Rome (the Agro Romano), Ricotta Romana is made in the traditional way from the whey of ewes' milk. It is whiter than that made from cows' milk whey and has a fine, soft texture. On the island of Sardinia, Ricotta Gentile is also made from ewes' milk whey, left over from the production of Pecorino Romano (so it too is sometimes called Ricotta Romana). It is drained in truncated cone-shaped strainers, giving it a distinctive shape. Because of its high moisture content, fresh ricotta has a very short shelflife, so various techniques have been implemented in different regions to preserve it.

SMOKED RICOTTA (RICOTTA AFFUMICATA)

In Calabria, the toe of Italy's boot, ricotta is made with the addition of 10 percent ewes' or goats' milk, to give a smoother, richer taste. It is drained in rectangular rush baskets (called fuscilli) for at least 24 hours, then salted and smoked for at least

three days, after which it is matured in a well-ventilated area for a further week.

It has a wrinkled, hard brown rind with a smooth, firm greyish-white interior. In the Veneto, in the northeast, ricotta is made from 100 percent Bruno Alpina cows' milk, with vinegar or citric acid, and salt added. It is heated slightly more than normal, almost to boiling point, drained in cloth sacks for a few hours, then pressed, salted and smoked for one week over fires of green conifer wood (such as beechwood). It can be eaten at this stage, or matured for a further month to be used as a grating cheese. The exterior is soft and golden brown, the interior is beige and the smoked flavour permeates the whole cheese.

In Abruzzo, in the southeast, Ricotta al Fumo di Ginepro is made from the whey of organically farmed ewes' milk left over from pecorino production. It is well drained in round rush baskets, salted and left to mature for one week, then smoked over juniper wood for about 24 hours. It has a very strong flavour and distinctive juniper aroma, no rind, a firm texture and a brownish-white interior.

Ricotta Mustia, from the island of Sardinia, is drained overnight in cylindrical moulds weighted with a wooden disc. It is then salted and left for 24 hours, before being smoked for five to six hours over aromatic herbs. It has a pale amber exterior and a firm brownish-white, slightly piquant interior.

BAKED RICOTTA (RICOTTA INFORNATA)

A speciality of Sicily, this ricotta is made in the traditional way from cows', ewes' or goats' milk whey, to which sea salt or

soured whey has been added. It is left to drain for one to two days in rush baskets, then sprinkled with black pepper and baked in oiled terracotta moulds in stone ovens, before being matured for a further 24 hours. It has a thin reddish-brown skin and a smooth, creamy white interior.

MATURED RICOTTA

In Basilicata, the traditional fresh ricotta is sometimes salted and matured for 15 to 30 days, then used as a grating or table cheese, as well as an ingredient in sweet and savoury dishes. Ricotta Forte (literally 'strong' ricotta) is made in Puglia in Italy's heel from ewes' or cows' milk whey. The coagulated proteins are left on top of the whey for a short while to solidify, then strained off into moulds to mature for a few days, during which they become slightly sour. They are then transferred to terracotta containers, stored in a cool damp place and kneaded every few days for three to four months. The resultant cheese is dark ivory in colour with a tangy flavour and is used mainly in pasta sauces including meat ragú.



Spinach & Ricotta Cannelloni

serves 4

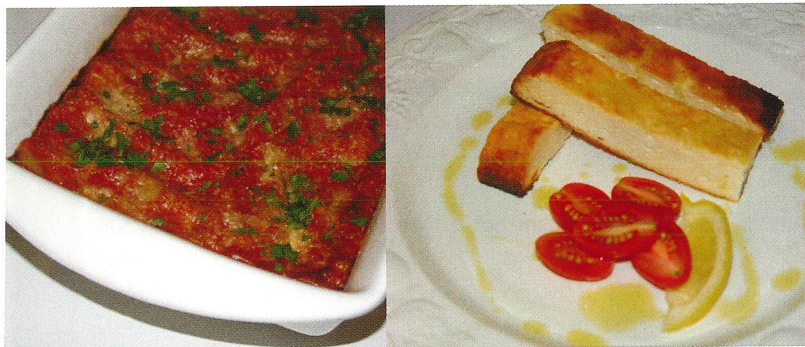
500g fresh ricotta
 250g frozen spinach
 16 (250g) cannelloni tubes ('quick cook' variety)
 4½ tbsp basil leaves, finely chopped
 1 egg, lightly beaten
 60g freshly grated Parmesan
 ¼ tsp freshly grated nutmeg
 salt flakes and freshly cracked black pepper

Tomato Sauce:

60ml extra virgin olive oil
 2 red onions, finely diced
 2 cloves garlic
 800g Italian canned tomatoes

1. Make tomato sauce. Heat olive oil in a saucepan and add the onions. Stir well, cover and leave to sweat over a low to medium heat.
2. Add the garlic and sweat for a few more minutes.
3. When onions are soft and golden, add the tomatoes, mash well with a potato masher and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 10 - 15 minutes then set aside until needed.
4. Meanwhile, thaw spinach in a microwave or saucepan, and squeeze out as much water as possible.
5. Mix spinach and basil leaves through ricotta. Stir egg and half the Parmesan through and season with nutmeg, salt and pepper.
6. Preheat oven to 180°C.
7. Using a piping bag (or freezer bag with one corner cut off), stuff the cannelloni tubes with the ricotta mixture.
8. Cover the bottom of an oiled baking dish with one third of the sauce.
9. Place the cannelloni in the dish, side by side in a single layer. Pour remaining sauce over the cannelloni, pressing them down if necessary to make sure they are covered with sauce.
10. Sprinkle the top with the remaining Parmesan and bake for 40 minutes.

Notes: This dish can be prepared several hours ahead of time and baked when ready to serve. The same stuffing and sauce can be used with large shell-shaped pasta (conchiglioni) for an unusual dinner party entrée. The shells need to be boiled before stuffing; allow two to three shells per person.



BUYING & STORING

Buy ricotta in small quantities as needed, as its high moisture content means that it literally starts to deteriorate almost as soon as it is made. Keep it covered in the fridge for a few days at most, and away from strong smelling ingredients, whose odours it will quickly absorb. If you have ricotta which is a few days old and need to keep it for a little longer, mix in a little salt, place it in a strainer over a bowl and drain overnight in the fridge, then rub with olive oil and bake at 180°C until it develops a golden crust. It will now keep for a further few days refrigerated and is great sliced over salads or eaten in sandwiches or on crackers.

USING

Fresh ricotta is as popular in sweet dishes as it is in savoury ones and its high moisture content means a relatively low fat content, so it's excellent for people concerned about kilojoules or cholesterol. It's great spread on hot toast or in salad sandwiches, as a filling for omelettes or frittatas, or stirred through hot pasta with chopped fresh herbs, lemon zest, olive oil, salt and pepper. For dessert, drizzle a mound of it with honey and serve with fresh fruit, use in a cheesecake filling or whipped, sweetened and mixed with candied peel or grated chocolate, to fill pastry cannoli shells. **T**