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Buttermilk

Part 1: Is there any butter in it?

Something about buttermilk brings to mind good old-fashioned home cooking. Biscuits (May 14 is National Buttermilk Biscuit Day) are probably number one on everyone's list, but buttermilk has many different applications in the kitchen - not only in recipes but it is also important to the science of cooking. Many folks labor under the misconception that buttermilk is basically a buttery, high-fat milk. This couldn't be farther from the truth.

What's in buttermilk?

You might be surprised to learn there is no butter, per se, in buttermilk, and it is lower in fat than sweet milk. Old-fashioned homemade buttermilk is the slightly sour, residual liquid which remains after butter is churned, ie. milk from the butter or *buttermilk*. It was usually flecked with tiny spots of sweet, creamy butter that didn't quite make it to the top to be skimmed. The flavor of buttermilk is reminiscent of yogurt and most people prefer it well-chilled. You'll find it is slightly thicker in texture than regular milk but not as heavy as cream. It takes *one gallon* of milk to yield *one-half pint* of true buttermilk.

Nowadays, most commercial buttermilk is made by adding a lactic acid bacteria culture to pasteurized sweet whole milk or, more commonly skim milk or non-fat milk, and it may or may not have added butter flecks. After the addition of the culture, the milk is left to ferment for 12 to 14 hours at a low temperature (optimum 69 degrees F.). It is usually labeled *cultured buttermilk* and may be salted or unsalted. Most commercial varieties are salted, so check the label if you are on a sodium-restricted diet.

Buttermilk history

In days gone by, nothing went to waste in the standard homestead, and this included the liquid leftover after churning butter. Combined with natural airborne bacteria, this liquid thickened and soured, taking on a pleasingly tangy flavor. The resulting buttermilk made an excellent addition to biscuits, pancakes, and baked goods.

Buttermilk Lore

Irish folklore claims a glass of buttermilk will cure a hangover, and when heated with a clove of garlic, it was sure to cure any variety of ailments. According to American folklore, drinking buttermilk will immunize one against poison oak and ivy. May pioneer women used buttermilk as a facial wash, believing the flecks of butter brought a smooth and creamy complexion.

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Buttermilk**Part 2: Substitutions and Equivalents**

Buttermilk will last up to two weeks due to its high acidity level, although it is best the first week. Once opened, it should be used within a week for drinking purposes, but it will be fine for baking often even after the expiration date. Always look for the latest expiration date on the carton, just as you would for any dairy product. Keep it refrigerated, and don't let it sit out on the counter or the kitchen table for any length of time.

Like milk, buttermilk can be frozen up to three months, but it's not recommended because it tends to separate. If you freeze it, let it thaw in the refrigerator and be sure to mix it well to reincorporate the solids with the liquid. Although it will be perfectly safe, you may prefer to use previously-frozen buttermilk in recipes rather than for drinking, as it tends to lose texture and mouth-appeal.

If you have no buttermilk, you can make your own substitute, but go for the real thing if you can. Yogurt can be substituted for buttermilk, volume for volume, meaning 1 cup of yogurt can be substituted for 1 cup of buttermilk. In the reverse, you can usually substitute buttermilk for yogurt or sour milk on a one to one basis.

You'll also find *buttermilk powder* in your grocery store. Basically dehydrated buttermilk, it has an admirable shelf life, almost indefinitely on the shelf unopened and up to a year and even longer after opening when stored in the refrigerator. Buttermilk powder is generally used for baking rather than drinking.

Leavened buttermilk recipes usually include baking soda. Take care in substituting buttermilk for regular milk when using baking powder, as it upsets the balance of alkali to acid. Buttermilk has more acid than regular milk, which will reduce the carbon dioxide released and thwart the **leavening** process. To achieve the desired result when using buttermilk instead of milk, substitute baking soda for some or all for of the baking powder. For each cup of buttermilk used in place of sweet milk, reduce the amount of baking powder by two teaspoons, and replace with 1/2 teaspoon of baking soda.

Equivalents	
1 cup buttermilk	= 1 cup yogurt
1 cup buttermilk	= 1 cup milk PLUS 1 Tbsp vinegar or lemon juice (let stand for 10 minutes before using in recipe)
1 cup buttermilk	= 1 cup milk PLUS 1-3/4 teaspoons cream of tartar
1 cup buttermilk	= 1 cup water PLUS 4 Tbsp powdered buttermilk (reconstitute before using or add dry to dry ingredients and wet to wet ingredients before mixing)
1 cup buttermilk	= 1/4 cup milk PLUS 3/4 cup yogurt
1 cup buttermilk	= 8.5 ounces
1 cup buttermilk	= 242 grams


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Part 3: Health Benefits

Buttermilk is lower in fat than regular milk, since the fat has been removed to make butter. It is also high in potassium, vitamin B₁₂, calcium, and riboflavin as well as a good source of phosphorus. Those with digestive problems are often advised to drink buttermilk rather than milk, as it is more quickly digested. Buttermilk has more lactic acid than skim milk. One cup of buttermilk has 99 calories and 2.2 grams of fat, whereas whole milk has 157 calories and 8.9 grams of fat. Do check the labels as some brands of buttermilk are higher in fat than others.

For those watching their caloric and/or fat intake, try putting a couple of tablespoons of buttermilk on your baked potato or in mashed potatoes in lieu of sour cream or butter. You'll get both the butter flavor and the slight tang of sour cream with a fraction of the calories. You can also make [mock sour cream](#) using buttermilk powder.

In the Kitchen

Buttermilk is excellent in baked goods, and also as a soup and salad dressing base. It lends a rich, hearty flavor with fewer calories than milk or cream. The tangy flavor of buttermilk goes well with sweet fruits such as peaches, cherries, and pears, particularly as [creme fraiche](#).

The acidic properties of buttermilk make it an effective and flavorful marinade, particularly with poultry. It is used as an acidic ingredient in baked goods to combat dingy grayish discoloring often caused by the chemical reaction of blueberries, walnuts and other foods that give off a blue cast. It also promotes browning of baked goods and improves texture. Many prefer dipping meat, poultry and fish in buttermilk rather than milk before coating for frying and baking.

Unless you feel adventurous and are not concerned about failure, use leavened recipes specifically designed with buttermilk as an ingredient rather than substituting buttermilk for milk. In savory recipes, this is not such a concern as usually no leavening is involved, but be aware that a slight tangy flavor will be imparted to the food, much like that of sour cream or yogurt.

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Buttermilk Recipes

If you arrived here via a search engine, don't miss my full feature on [Buttermilk](#), which includes important information about properly substituting buttermilk for milk in certain recipes, particularly baked ones. You'll find other articles on [specific foods](#), such as gelatin, honey, ketchup, maple syrup, vanilla, and more.

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