



KEFIR

SURPRISINGLY VERSATILE

By Jeffrey Spear

For many years, consumer demand for foods and beverages that support healthy lifestyles has been steadily on the rise. Whether this has been satisfied through added protein (i.e. eggs, dairy products, tofu, protein powders), energy supplements (i.e. caffeine, guarana, mushrooms, herbal extracts), fermented foods (i.e. kimchi, pickles, kombucha), or other such healthful ingredients, there are many ways to add functionality and broaden the nutritional appeal of your menu.

One of the most versatile yet somewhat overlooked ingredients is kefir. Originating in Asia's mountainous Caucasus region, this creamy beverage has been enjoyed for centuries. Considered a somewhat esoteric beverage, frequently described as "sippable yogurt," kefir is a tangy, fermented drink rich in probiotics, protein, calcium, and vitamin D. Containing more than 50 strains of bacteria and yeast, it can increase microbial diversity and reduce inflammation in the gut. With so many healthful benefits, coupled with its ability to integrate well in

many culinary applications, it becomes obvious why kefir's popularity is on the rise.

In foodservice environments, kefir is being used in both sweet and savory applications ranging from smoothies, cocktails, coffees and sauces to marinades, dressings, dips, and baked goods. In addition, it can be converted into creamy spreads, cheeses and butters, expanding its culinary possibilities even further.

Also important is that, while kefir is commonly made with cow's milk, it can also be made with goat, buffalo, sheep, and camel's milk. Plus, with a little extra care, non-dairy versions of kefir can be made with plant-based milks including coconut, oat, soy, and almond milk.

Along with many other healthful products, kefir has been found in grocery stores and juice bars catering to healthy lifestyles, relying on commercially available brands such as



Chef/Owner Johnny Courtney,
Atoma (Seattle, WA) | Photo Credit: Kyler A Martin

Lifeway and Maple Hill Creamery. With the growing popularity of fermented foods, recognizing that kefir is relatively easy to make, adventurous chefs have begun formulating their own. Plus, when over-cultured, the separation of curds and whey provides a great way to make kefir cheese—a low-cost substitute for ricotta, cream cheese, sour cream, and butter.

In foodservice environments, statistics compiled by Datassential (the industry's leading food research and insights firm) indicate a minor presence of kefir on restaurant menus (<1% menu penetration). Of course, there are several innovative chefs taking full advantage of its probiotic, nutritional and culinary attributes.

At Caravan of Dreams (New York, NY), a Mediterranean-inspired vegan restaurant, **Chef Angel Moreno** features kefir in a variety of savory dishes including his Raw Manicotti Platter (cucumber manicotti, avocado, arugula, house-made cultured cashew kefir cheese, walnut mushroom meat, sun-dried marinara sauce). Similarly, at Sudova (Cincinnati, OH), a contemporary Eastern European restaurant, **Chef Sarah Dworak** offers Kotleta (kefir brined & fried chicken, snap peas, dill sauce).

According to **Chef/Owner Johnny Courtney** at Atoma (Seattle, WA),

“I love the flavor of kefir. It brings a whole new experience to our dishes, adding depth and complexity.”

When asked about the healthful benefits of kefir, he adds, “Serving probiotic foods is not our goal. We serve decadent and lush foods, putting something delicious into people’s mouths.”

For chefs thinking about making kefir and adding it to their menus, Courtney recommends, “Not much can go wrong. It’s worth experimenting, experiencing the layers of flavor kefir can add. Why not give it a shot?”

If you’re curious, kefir grains (the bacteria and yeast used to start the kefir culture) and “how to” videos are widely available. Additionally, there are lots of recipes to be discovered, demonstrating just how well kefir works in a seemingly endless number of applications. All you need is a little imagination.



From Atoma, one of Seattle’s most respected restaurants, Chef/Owner Johnny Courtney serves Grilled Cucumbers with sumac kefir creme and sweet chili sauce. | Photo Credit: Kyler A Martin



RECIPE

Cheesy Butternut Squash and Tomato Casserole

Courtesy Lifeway Kefir (www.lifewaykefir.com)

Serves 12

INGREDIENTS

- 16 ounces fusilli or rotini pasta
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ yellow onion, diced
- 3 cups of fresh (or frozen) butternut squash, diced
- 1 15 ounce can tomato sauce (no salt added)
- ½ cup half-and-half
- ½ cup whole milk plain kefir
- 4 fresh Roma tomatoes, diced
- 1 cup farmer cheese, crumbled, divided
- 1 cup Parmesan cheese, grated, divided
- 2 tablespoons dried parsley or 3-4 tablespoons fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried sage
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Fill a large stockpot with water and bring to a boil. Add the pasta and cook according to package instructions. Drain, reserving 1 cup of pasta water.

Meanwhile, place the oil in a large saucepan or stock pot over medium high heat. Add the onions and cook until slightly caramelized. Add the diced butternut squash and cook until lightly browned.

Stir in the tomato sauce, half-and-half, kefir, and the reserved pasta water and bring to a simmer. Add the Roma tomatoes, ½ cup of farmer cheese, ½ cup Parmesan, parsley, oregano, sage, salt, and pepper and return to a simmer. Continue cooking, stirring occasionally until the cheese has melted and the sauce has thickened.

Stir in the cooked, drained pasta and mix until the pasta is well-coated. Transfer this mixture into a 13-x 9-inch baking dish; sprinkle with the remaining ½ cup farmer cheese and ½ cup Parmesan cheese, spreading evenly across the top.

Bake 12-15 minutes until the topping has browned and the mixture is bubbly. Serve while hot.