

MAKE YOUR OWN LEBANEES

by Jack Ryan

I am sure that I am not the only reader who must work "off the farm", or who is not even a small farmer. Many of us read Small Farmer's Journal and similar publications in preparation for an eventual move to the country. Yet, because of the unstable economic situation today, many have found ways to create a measure of self-sufficiency anyway, perhaps by storing food in case of a natural or man-made emergency.

We live on four and one-half acres in southern Arkansas, and we do have rabbits, chickens and a garden, but are in no way ready to take on a cow or a couple of goats. So we buy milk at the grocery store, along with other foods that we don't produce ourselves. Because we have two youngsters, Clint and Scott, we do not want to risk running out of milk. We have a moderate food storage program — nothing like a year's supply of nitrogen-packed goodies — but some essentials on the shelf just in case of a truckers' strike or something. One thing that we keep on the emergency shelf is instant nonfat dried milk that we buy at the grocery store. I would guess from the expiration date on the package that this milk has a shelf-life of about a year. We try to keep our stock rotating by using the milk. But, although Clint likes "lumps and bumps" (dried milk with just enough water to make a lumpy paste), neither Janet nor I like the taste of reconstituted milk. So how do we rotate our stock? Janet found that we all liked the yogurt that she could make from our powdered cow (and make it cheaper than from store-bought skim milk). Those of you that produce your own milk probably already know how much better homemade yogurt is than the stuff that you might buy. As it turns out, our powdered milk ends up rotating pretty fast (we may end up with goats sooner than we thought). But yogurt isn't the best part of the story!

How would you like to make your own nonfat cream cheese or sour cream? Sound impossible? You're probably right, but you can whip up something that's the next best thing, and quite satisfactory for many uses.

Here on Whippoorwill Hill, Jan's been making her substitute for cream cheese and sour cream — lebanee — for over a year, although she just recently discovered what it's called. Okay, what's "lebanee" (or lebanie)? Lebanee is a Middle Eastern white cheese which is not quite as stiff as commercial cream cheese, a little stiffer than commercial sour cream, and is made from homemade yogurt.

You can use whatever recipe for yogurt that you have been using, but for her yogurt Jan mixes two cups of nonfat dry milk with three cups of water. Then she adds one tablespoonful of commercial nonfat yogurt or either yogurt or lebanee from a previous home-made batch, and mixes it in well with a whisk. She pours this into a bowl that she's warmed under running hot water and sets it in our gas oven. The pilot light keeps the oven a good temperature (90 to 110 degrees F.). Home-made starter produces yogurt in about six to ten hours, while store-bought yogurt used as starter takes considerably longer, from twelve to eighteen hours.

I realize that Jan's method may seem considerably simpler than some you may have read about, but she has only had one bad batch — and that was one that used starter from a batch that had been around for several days, and then the incubation accidentally went for a day and a half. Now, Jan freezes a couple of starter-sized portions as soon as a new batch of yogurt is done. But you should definitely not take any chances. Should you end up with something with an odd color, strange appearance, or with an unusual odor, throw it out and start over.

Now, on to lebanee.

The fresh batch of yogurt is dumped into a colander or a sieve lined with cheesecloth. This is set in the refrigerator until the whey separates and is collected in a bowl below the sieve. Some people like to drink the whey. Our chickens LOVE it!

The white solid in the cheesecloth is lebanee. With a little trial and error, you'll find lebanee to be a good substitute for cream cheese or sour cream in many of your favorite recipes.

A delicious dip or sandwich spread can be made with lebanee and chopped olives. Or try lebanee with lemon juice, horseradish and salt.

You might like to try lebanee mixed with mashed boiled egg and a little mustard for lunch. Use lebanee for a topping on refried beans, or mixed with jam or mashed fruit for dessert. If you like, you can spread lebanee plain on dark bread, or add sliced tomatoes for a terrific sandwich.

If you want a hearty lunch to make your mouth water on a drippy spring day, fry up some tender young onions in butter. Add some cooked pasta and cheese. Then let it cool slightly and mix with some lebanee. Mmm — good!

I did say trial and error, didn't I? Lebanee did not work in Jan's recipe for cheesecake. In desperation, (I love cheesecake), I had her try a recipe from a box of Knox gelatin (we don't make our own gelatin, either) for their gelatin cheesecake. She didn't get the traditional cheesecake that I was hoping for, but what she did get was delicious. If you are interested, here is Jan's modified recipe for

1 envelope Knox gelatin

2/3 cup sugar

1 cup boiling pineapple juice

2 cups (1 batch) lebanee

1/4 teaspoonful salt

1 teaspoonful vanilla

9 inch graham cracker crust (if desired)

Mix the gelatin and sugar, and dissolve in the boiling juice. Beat in the lebanee, salt and vanilla until smooth. Beat on high speed for a minute. Pour into bowls or the pie crust and chill. You can substitute any other fruit (or vegetable?) juice for the pineapple juice. And you might want to try using honey instead of sugar.

For the crust, Jan mixes 1 cup graham cracker crumbs, 1/4 cup sugar and 1/4 cup warm butter and bakes at 375 degrees F. for eight minutes.

If you are looking for something different to do with your homemade yogurt, remember: Lebanee is good, cheap, nutritious, non-fattening and easy to make. Try it — you'll like it! ~