

Dessert de Leche

**Latin American
caramelized sweets
are a snap to make
(and equally easy
to consume)**

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Whether you call it dulce de leche, milk jam, or *cajeta*, it all—ahem—boils down the same. It's incredible that the simple combination of whole milk, sugar, baking soda, and salt can result in something so addictively delicious that it captivates entire nations.

While this “milk sweet” is found throughout Latin America, no two countries are as passionate about it as Argentina and Colombia (except maybe Uruguay). The lust for caramelized milk is fierce, as are the beliefs about how it should be consumed.

I discovered this firsthand while staying with an ex-boyfriend's family in Argentina. After I innocently inquired as to the most traditional way to consume dulce de leche, a three-week debate ensued, in which overseas family members and random passersby were often consulted. If majority rules, then it's safe to say Argentines enjoy their dulce de leche straight from the jar, *muchas gracias*.

Dulce de leche's origins are somewhat hazy, but popular legend says it was created in the early 19th century, when generals—and political enemies—Juan Lavalle and Juan Manuel de Rosas met to sign a treaty. The latter's maid was preparing some warm milk with sugar, but was called away on an errand. When she returned, she discovered that the milk had caramelized and thickened. From that a national obsession was born.

Traditionally, dulce de leche was made in the home, using a *paila*, or flat-bottomed, wide-mouthed copper pot (to aid in the reduction process); some cooks still place marbles in the pot to help prevent scorching. Because making dulce de leche is time-consuming and requires constant stirring, families often opted to purchase it from small neighborhood *fábricas* (factories).

When she was a little girl, my ex's mother was given a bucket each morning so she could fetch the dulce de leche from the *fábrica*. A good thing, too, as her own mother was known to spoon it straight from

the jar late at night, feigning innocence come morning when the family inquired as to the missing contents.

A Colombian friend of mine recalls his grandmother making it nearly every day and seeing neighbors bringing pails home from the *fábrica* by balancing them on either end of a wooden pole braced across their shoulders.

Dulce de leche goes by other names and has slight variations in texture and flavor in other countries, but when not consumed straight up, it's used as a spread or filling or flavoring for pastry, ice cream, cakes, or cookies. Alas, mass-produced brands have taken over the marketplace, so quality varies wildly (on a positive note, even the most generic are still pretty darned good). In the last decade, however, there's been a resurgence of craft dulce de leche production, and today in Argentina and Colombia you'll find jars for sale at open-air markets and specialty shops, as well as straight from the farmstead.

No matter what you call your milk jam, or where it's from, don't be surprised if you find yourself standing in front of the refrigerator at 3 a.m., spoon in hand. **C**

PHOTOS: Laurel Miller (process steps 1-3)

BASIC MILK JAM

We've adapted this recipe from one used by Anthony Bohlinger, the bar director of Food & Wine's Chefs Club at the St. Regis in Aspen, Colo. Bohlinger likes to finish the milk jam by whirring it in a blender with a tablespoon or two of water, to give it a glossy finish and thinner consistency.

Makes approximately 1 cup

Supplies:

Heavy-bottomed saucepan
Balloon whisk
Candy thermometer
Plastic container with tight-fitting lid or seal, for storage

Ingredients:

4 cups whole milk
1½ cups sugar
1 teaspoon Madagascar vanilla
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon kosher salt



1 Add all ingredients to heavy-bottomed saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil, whisking constantly, and lower heat to medium.



2 Reduce milk mixture by half, whisking constantly, for approximately 1 hour, or until candy thermometer inserted into pot reads 225°F.



3 The milk should caramelize to a medium golden-brown hue and have a consistency slightly thicker than maple syrup. Bear in mind that the milk jam will thicken a bit as it cools, so you may want it a bit thinner if you plan to use it for baking or drizzling.



4 Store in a tightly sealed container in the refrigerator for up to one week.

The Guide to MILK JAMS

Get to know these spoonable sweets—and where to buy them outside of Latin America—with our handy cheat sheet.

Arequipe: Consumed in the same manner, with the same fervor, as dulce de leche. Special desserts include *milhojas* (“thousand leaves cake”) and *arroz con leche de arequipe* (rice pudding).

Made in: Colombia, Venezuela

Milk type: Cow

Try it: Annabella Buffalo Creamery’s version, which goes by the more familiar “dulce de leche,” eschews the traditional cow’s milk for buffalo, resulting in an extra-rich, high-butterfat product. Available nationwide at select specialty shops, regional Whole Foods, and Zingerman’s.

annabellacheese.com

Cajeta:

A specialty of the city of Celaya, Guanajuato, where it’s been made since the 16th century with goat’s milk. Artisanal *cajeta* today is produced in various parts of Mexico and mass produced nationwide by companies such as Nestle. Very sweet, it’s generally used in desserts or cooked into a caramel and sold by the disc or cylinder from street and sweets vendors.

Made in: Mexico

Milk type: Goat

Try it: You can find generic *cajeta* in any Hispanic market or grocery section. For handcrafted versions check your local farmers’ markets, especially if you live in an area with a large Hispanic population. Washington’s Little Brown Farm, for example, makes *cajeta* seasonally. littlebrownfarm.com

Doce de Leite: Generally less caramelized than dulce de leche or *cajeta*; thick, creamy, with a butterscotchlike flavor. Mostly used as a filling, flavoring, or sauce in desserts.

Made in: Brazil, Portugal

Milk type: Cow

Try it: Nestle and Itambé are popular brands. Find them at Brazilian groceries or via mail order. brazilianshop.com

Dulce de Leche: Eaten straight or as a condiment or filling in *alfajores* (short-bread cookies); *rogel* (layer cake smothered in meringue); *churros* (cylinders of fried dough); *bolas de fraile* (round doughnut); *panqueques* (crepes); and ice cream.

Milk type: Cow

Made in: Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay

Try it: La Salamandra is an outstanding, commercially made Argentine version, widely available at specialty shops in the United States.

lasalamandra.com.ar

Manjar, Manjar Blanco, Manjar de Leche:

Thick, deeply caramelized, and slightly granular in texture, this is more of a spread or candy. It’s usually served at breakfast and onces, or teatime.

Made in: Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia

Milk type: Cow

Try it: *Manjar* is difficult to find in the States, but look for craft producers such as Chilean chef Guisell Osorio, now based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her *alfajores* are ethereal.

saboresdelsurf.com/alfajores

Milk Jam:

Made in: Vermont

Milk type: Cow, goat

Try it: Fat Toad Farm makes a luscious farmstead goat’s milk “caramel” in four flavors, including Cinnamon and Salted Bourbon. Available nationwide at specialty food shops and co-ops.

fattoadfarm.com

Natilla, Manjar Blanco: Not to be confused with the Spanish flan *natillas*, this isn’t nearly as common in the US as it is in Argentina and Colombia. You’ll find it used as a filling in *alfajores* or *pionono* (rolled sponge cake) or in *suspiro*, a tooth-achingly sweet custard topped with meringue that is a specialty of Lima.

Made in: Peru

Milk type: Cow, goat

Try it: If you’re lucky enough to have a Peruvian cheesemaker like Javier Salmon of northern California’s Yerba Santa Dairy in your area, pick up some farmstead natilla at the farmers’ market.

yerbasantadairy.wordpress.com

