

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/voraciously/wp/2019/02/06/ghee-has-been-an-indian-staple-for-millennia-now-the-rest-of-the-world-is-catching-on/>

# Ghee has been an Indian staple for millennia. Now the rest of the world is catching on.

By **Awanthi Vardaraj**

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The very first solid food my mother fed me as a baby in our southern India household was mashed-up rice mixed with a little ghee. This set the stage for my lifelong love affair with this nutty, rich, golden clarified butter.

In recent years, ghee has become a global phenomenon, trending as a “superfood” and beloved by followers of the popular Keto diet. But its history — real and legendary — is long.

Ghee originated in India, where the heat was not conducive to storing butter for long periods. But when that butter was clarified — heated until the water evaporates and the milk solids separate away — the product had a long shelf life. For thousands of years, ghee has been featured in Indian recipes, and even in Hindu mythology, which attributes its origins to the divine. The story goes that Prajapati, lord of the creatures, rubbed his hands together to create the first ghee, which he then poured into flames to create his offspring. As a result, ghee is poured into sacred fires by Hindus to this day, a practice thought to be auspicious for marriages, funerals and other ceremonies.

*[Salted butter is back — even though for some cooks, it never went away]*

It was also extensively consumed as part of a balanced diet. Ancient Sanskrit literature describes ghee as fit for the gods. Foods cooked in ghee are considered superior to those that eschew it; Vedic cooking divided all food into kacha khana (food not cooked in ghee) and pucca khana (food cooked in ghee). Modern Indian cooking no longer differentiates in this way, but the practice is carried on in religious ceremonies and cooking for festivals such as the Hindu festival called Navratri.



(Tom McCorkle for The Washington Post; food styling by Bonnie S. Benwick/The Washington Post)

*[\[Ghee is the secret to these meltingly tender 5-ingredient cookies\]](#)*

Ghee has also been venerated through the ages for its medicinal properties in Ayurvedic medicine, which prescribes it as a cooling food (it lowers the body's temperature), as a digestive aid, and even as a salve to soothe burns. In "[A Historical Dictionary of Indian Food](#)," K.T. Achaya writes that ghee is "strengthening, aids digestion, and acts quite powerfully on the mind, improving the memory and intellect." That's not all. Ghee is also high in butyrate, which reduces inflammation in the body, and it is also rich in vitamin A. It is also perfect for people who are lactose intolerant because hardly any of the butter's lactose or casein remains.

Gone are the days when ghee was thought to clog up arteries, and gone are the unhealthy trans fats that tried — and failed — to replace it.

The United States has a particularly amusing history with ghee. In the 1950s, upon discovering that American dairy farmers had more than 260 million pounds of surplus butter, the government had a novel idea: Convert the butter into ghee, and offload it onto the Indian subcontinent, where millions of people adore the stuff.

The government took this prospect so seriously that dairy expert Louis H. Burgwald was dispatched to India, where he dutifully peddled the American ghee and got merchants to sample his wares. The first lesson that he learned was that tastes for ghee varied across the length and breadth of the subcontinent. The ghee preferred in the south and the west (ghee made from the milk of cows) varied vastly from the ghee preferred in the north and the east (ghee made from buffalo milk). Burgwald was enthusiastic, though,

and reported back to his bosses that if regional tastes could be catered to, then the Indian subcontinent was ripe for the picking. Eventually, nothing came of the undertaking.

### *[[Make the recipe: Ghee-Baked Cauliflower](#)]*

In a [1955 article](#) in the New York Times headlined “Ghee is for good,” veteran writer R.K. Narayan waxed lyrical about its bountiful delights. “Ghee is, no doubt, clarified butter,” Narayan wrote, “but it is also something more, in the same way that wine is more than the juice of a squeezed grape. Ghee is like a genius born to a dull parent.” He calls the invention of ghee the subcontinent’s highest achievement.

Today, ghee is widely available, both online and in stores. Without the milk solids of butter, it can be used for frying and other high-heat cooking. Use the ghee as you would use any fat: roast vegetables with it; slather it onto meat to baste; fry eggs with it. You can even stir it into your coffee (for that trendy “bulletproof” approach) or your morning porridge (which I love to do). Refrigerate your ghee if you like, but it’s not a requirement and will keep at room temperature; it will solidify in the fridge but melt at room temperature or when heated.

To make your own, the same way I do at home, here’s how to achieve pure golden, slightly nutty ghee:

- Heat a pound of unsalted organic butter (preferably made from the milk of grass-fed cows) in a heavy-bottomed pot over low heat without stirring. Be patient. Eventually, the butter will begin to simmer and make a slight crackling sound.
- After about 20 minutes, the crackling will stop, and there will be a thin layer of fat on top and heavier solids at the bottom of the pan. Watch the ghee very carefully to make sure that it doesn’t burn. The butter should be a clear golden color on top, with very few air bubbles on the surface. At this point the ghee is done, and you can toss a handful of fresh curry leaves into it if you’d like.
- Turn off the heat and allow it to sit for an hour, then strain it carefully into a clean, dry, airtight container. The sediment at the bottom can be discarded, but the foam on top is okay.
- Store away from light and heat for three months, or refrigerated for up to a year — although in my experience ghee never lasts that long!

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