

What you need to know about cooking with low-fat dairy products

In the world of light cooking, swapping olive oil for butter is one thing; using fat-free cheese instead of regular cheese is another. But creamy, flavorful recipes are not lost on the Plan. Here's how nonfat sour cream, skim milk and fat-free yogurt (to name a few) can help you work wonders in the kitchen.

Fat-Free Sour Cream can be used for much more than dip recipes – it can add a little creaminess to your favorite chicken, tuna or potato salad recipes, and smoothness to frittatas. If the consistency of your renovated dish seems a little “off,” try cutting back on the sour cream and subbing some for plain fat-free yogurt or fat-free mayonnaise instead.

Plain Fat-Free Yogurt is so versatile that it can be used to tenderize meat, add thickness to sauces (instead of heavy cream), replace some mayonnaise and sour cream in dips, and serve as a base for salad dressings and marinades. Try flavoring some with fresh basil, ginger and sugar substitute for a refreshing sauce for grilled fruit. One note: If regular fat-free yogurt is too “runny” for you, try plain nonfat Greek-style yogurt instead which is creamier and has a thicker consistency.

Tofu, although not a fat-free dairy product, can be used like one as a cheese or cream alternative: Mash soft tofu and add it to egg dishes for a cheesy texture, purée it in smoothies, or mash and season it for a ricotta substitute in some Italian recipes. You can also purée silken tofu and use it as a mayo substitute in salad dressings and as a cream replacement in some soups and pasta dishes.

Fat-Free Mayonnaise is far from the real thing, but if you flavor it with a homemade pesto sauce, fresh dill or even minced red onion, it can be much more than just a passable substitute.

Fat-Free Ricotta Cheese can be used in both sweet and savory preparations. Beat some with Splenda and ground cinnamon for a lovely fruit dip or fruit compote topping, or substitute skim ricotta for regular ricotta in your favorite (whole-wheat) lasagna recipe. You can purée skim ricotta until smooth and use it as a base for dip recipes, too.

Fat-Free Cheese (American, Cheddar, etc.) does not work well as toppings in baked recipes since it does not melt and bubble like regular – or even low fat – cheese (although broiling does help the cheese to brown a bit). Your best bets are to use fat-free shredded cheese in a baked dish so it's mixed in with other ingredients, or to sprinkle some on top of dishes for a dash of color.

Evaporated Skim Milk is canned, unsweetened fat-free milk that has had about 60% of its water removed making it a great substitute for heavy cream in recipes. You can also try swapping whipped, chilled evaporated skim milk for regular whipped cream in some recipes.

Skim Milk is not a true substitute for heavy cream but it can help add a nice, creamy taste to some puréed soups (like butternut squash) when the milk is added just at the end of cooking. Skim milk mixed with a little fat-free sour cream can add non-fat creaminess to mashed potatoes, too.

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