

# Flawless Ricotta Every Time

by eklie

If you've ventured into the world of cheese making, you've probably made ricotta. Since it's very easy to make, yet yields a surprisingly sophisticated product, it is an ideal starter cheese. But, don't be dismissive of ricotta. Even after graduating to much more complex cheese projects, I find myself returning to its delicate sweetness and ephemeral texture. Not to mention, it's a workhorse in the kitchen and a mainstay of Italian- American cooking. Cheese makers of all levels should be interested in a quick but excellent ricotta. So, if you've had problems with your ricotta making or would like to improve an already good recipe, I have a tip for you – baking soda.

While doing research for the cheese making class I teach, I read and tested a number of published ricotta recipes. As you may already know, ricotta is an acid precipitated cheese. That is, instead of using cultures or cultures and rennet to make the milk solids, (i.e. curds separate from the whey) an acid is used to complete the reaction. The specific acid varies from recipe to recipe, but the most common are citric acid powder and vinegar, either the white or apple cider variety. After comparing several recognized recipes' methods and ingredients I was surprised to find the recipe I'd been taught as an apprentice had an addition – baking soda.

Recipes frequently warn you not to use too much acid when precipitating the curd. This is because excess acid will impart sour or bitter flavors to your finished product. However, you want to get as much solids out of the whey as you can for the best texture and yield. If your whey still appears milky after you've added your acid and stirred, it's suggested you slowly add more (with vinegar 1 teaspoon at a time) until it achieves complete precipitation – i.e. all the ricotta you're going to get is floating in completely used up whey. If this is your first time you may not know what to look for, and the thought of possibly ruining your beautiful cheese is daunting. Or, if you want this to be quick and easy as can be there's a simple solution – baking soda.

Baking soda is a basic compound and acid is, of course, an acid. As you probably learned in grade-school science class, if these two opposites meet, a chemical reaction occurs. When you add the baking soda (after you've strained off the whey), any unused acid left in the ricotta reacts with it and is then neutralized. Yes, there will be some white foam like those science fair experiments, but that means it is doing its job – getting rid of any potential off flavors.

I agree you don't want to go unduly overboard with your acid, but I also want this to be a “can make it in your sleep” kind of recipe. So, instead of trying to find the perfect equilibrium of acid for curd formation, I just add a splash or “glugs” of vinegar one at a time until I think it looks right. If I overdo it a little I don't worry – the baking soda will correct my liberal hand. It eliminates any sour flavors while also removing cheese related stress!

Here's my tried and true ricotta recipe, but the addition of baking soda will work in any recipe, so feel free to incorporate it into your own. Just add it after you're done straining and watch it work its magic (or really chemistry!). With this method I have never had anything but sweet, delicate fluffy ricotta. (Yet, anyway!).

## Whole Milk Ricotta

1 Gallon whole. raw or pasteurized, milk

¼ White vinegar

1 tsp. baking soda

Salt to taste (optional)

1. In a 6qt+ non-reactive pot slowly bring 1 gallon whole milk to between 185-195 degrees Fahrenheit. Stir frequently to prevent scorching. This should take 15 minutes or more.
2. Add ¼ cup white vinegar. Stir once and let stand for 10 minutes. You should see the curds start separating from the whey. Check periodically. If the curds are not separating enough add 1 tablespoon of vinegar at time until whey is not milky looking.
3. While you're waiting, line a colander with damp cheesecloth (depending on the weave you may need to fold it a few times) and set colander over a pot or in a sanitized sink.
4. Drain ricotta into colander. Don't scrape the bottom! It will get scorched bits in your beautiful ricotta. Let drain briefly – the longer it drains the thicker and drier it will be.
5. Transfer to container and whisk in baking soda.
6. Add salt if desired, then refrigerate.