Maiden Voyage in Plant-based Spreadable Cheese

Catherine Brown, plant-based chef & culinary nutritionist at A Seat at My Table

I'm super stoked to be experimenting with making my own plant-based cheese products! This is the one category of dairy I find most difficult to go without. Most commercial plant-based products available near me are either highly processed, expensive or lacking in variety (or all three). But first, a note about the word "cheese".

The vegan application of this word seems to provoke a fair bit of argument from dairy consumers and I can understand why. After all, for centuries feta, mozarella, parmesan, gouda, etc. conjure specific flavors, textures and dishes deriving from the milk of goats, sheep or cows. As a chef, nutritionist, grower and consumer, I want to be clear about what ingredients I am using. I thought of changing the spelling to make a distinction, using "cheez" instead, but this just brings to mind Cheez Whiz... no explanation necessary. No amount of brainstorming produced a suitable replacement. Returning to the dictionary, I read the second definition of the word cheese, denoted by Merriam-Webster, as "something resembling cheese in shape or consistency". This works for me, so I'm going with it.

Now, on to more important things. Like these stunning lil' ramekin's of deliciousness...

This process does require a bit of time waiting for microbes to work their magic, so plan ahead. I chose to start with the easiest style first, a Boursin-style spreadable cheese. First, you'll need to make the lactic acid bacteria that will culture the nut paste. If you're curious about the chemical process of lactic acid fermentation, watch this video from Khan Academy.

The easiest way to make lactic acid for the fermentation process is to make rejuvelac. Rejuvelac was invented by the late Dr. Ann Wigmore in the 1960's and is a cultured probiotic-rich drink made by fermenting freshly sprouted grains in

water. You can read more about it from the Foundation for Advancement in Cancer Therapy.

Let's get started!

You can make rejuvelac using either quinoa or wheat berries. Wheat berries are less expensive, so that's what I used here. If you need a gluten-free option, stick with using quinoa. Trust me, it's really not complicated or scary. You can do this! I encourage you to use the rest of the photos on my blog to help guide your process. Here's the link: https://www.chefcatherinebrown.com/single-post/2017/08/04/Maiden-Adventure-in-Plant-based-Spreadable-Cheese

To Make rejuvelac:

1/2 cup whole wheat berries (or quinoa) Do not use pre-sprouted.
1-quart wide-mouth canning jar

Cover the wheat berries with water, let sit 8-12 hours, then drain. Cover the opening of the jar with cheesecloth (secured with a rubber band or the metal ring of the lid). Rinse in cold water and drain 2x a day (unless your room is very warm (>76 degrees F), in which case make it 3x/day) until small sprouts form. Quinoa will take about 24 hours, wheat berries can take up to 48 hours. Once sprouted, fill the jar with cold filtered water and leave at room temperature out of direct sunlight for 2-3 days. The total amount of time will depend on the temperature of the room, but the water should become slightly cloudy, bubbly and taste tangy. You will need to taste it for tanginess (using a clean spoon each time).

Once it's cloudy, bubbly and tangy (it will have a slight odor, but not be unpleasant), strain the berries (these can be used once more for another batch of rejuvelac following the same procedure minus the sprouting). You now have lactic-acid rich rejuvelac. The rejuvelac can be refrigerated for 3-4 weeks until ready to use. I recommend dating your jar. You can store the wheat berries in the refrigerator up to a week until you're ready to make more rejuvelac. You can read more about other uses for rejuvelac (including lots of great photos of how to make it!) from the Fermentation Podcast.

Next step:

Soaking the nuts. This can be statrted 24 hours after your rejuvelac has been started to get a jump ahead. You can either purchase blanched almonds or soak regular almonds and slip the skins off yourself (less expensive but more time consumng). For this batch, I purchased blanched almonds online from Anna and Sarah.

2 cups blanched raw almonds, soaked in water for 12-24 hours (I soaked for 24 hours)
1 cup rejuvelac
1/2 tsp sea salt

I made a double batch, which is why you see twice as much rejuvelac and soaked almonds in this photo. Drain and rinse your almonds. Place the almonds, sea salt and rejuvelac in a high-speed blender and process until smooth and no longer grainy between your fingers. You may need to stop the blender and scrape the mixture down several times. I processed this double recipe in three batches. The Nutribullet does an adequate job, but I will need a more powerful blender if I'm going to be making this often (serious head-nodding)!

Place this mixture in a clean bowl and cover with a non-porous lid or use plastic wrap. Leave at room temperature, out of direct sunlight for 1 to 2 days. The length of time will depend on the temperature of the room. Taste and smell it throughout the process so you'll know when the mixture has cultured enough. It should begin to taste tangy and smell, well... cheesy, but not like a stinky Stilton or Limburger. Make sure you are tasting the center of your container too, and not just the edges.

My room temperature ranged between 62-72 degrees and took 2 days to reach the level of cheesy tanginess I wanted. The mixture will expand slightly during the culturing process.

The almond cheese can now be flavored any way you choose, or left plain. These are the versions I made in the photo above:

Store the cheese in a contaner with a lid and refrigerate for up to 2-3 weeks... trust me, it won't last that long!
This cheese is a good replacement for cream cheese on bagels or sandwiches.

This cheese can also be piped to make canapes or other appetizers.