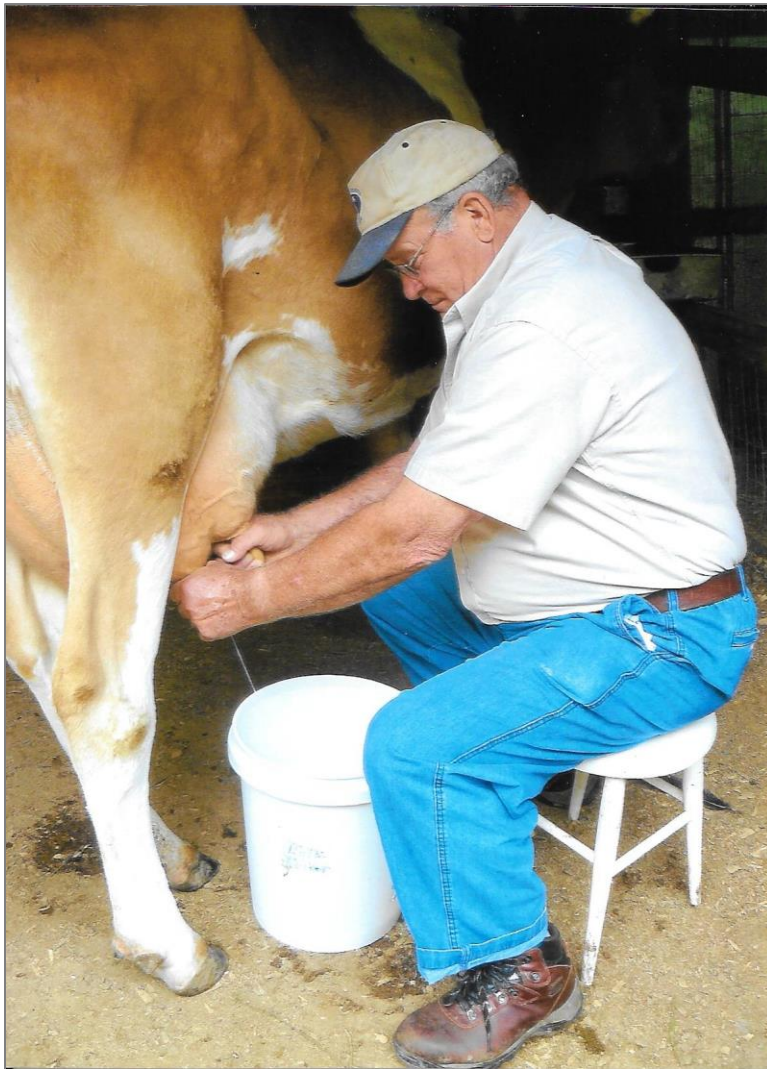


Hand Churned Cow Butter

Lynn's Note: I interviewed Viola Humphreys for the first Backroads book about making homemade cow butter with an old-fashioned ceramic churn. At the time she and husband Lowell were the longtime caretakers living at Skylark Farm on the Blue Ridge Parkway. Some years later, after they retired, I went to her house near Montebello and once again watched the butter making process; this time with a hand-cranked glass churn that sat on her kitchen table. Two different locations, two different cows, but the same sweet tasting butter you ever smeared on a biscuit! Read on to learn just how it's done —



Lowell Humphreys milking the family cow to make butter

as cheesecloth. The strained milk is then put into the refrigerator in covered wide-mouth gallon jars. If it is the morning milking, by that evening the cream will have risen to the top of the jar. There would be approximately three to four inches of cream that Viola would skim off with a

Although I've heard the older people talk about making butter the old-fashioned way, I had never seen or been a part of the process until Viola Humphreys asked if I'd like to come and watch her make some.

The Humphreys milked their own cows, and Viola strained the raw milk for drinking purposes and churned butter out of the cream. Both Viola and her husband Lowell were raised up on mountain farms and their families had always kept cows, so they were well acquainted with the milking process. They said the besides the Brown Swiss breed, Guernsey and Jersey cows give the milk with the most butterfat content which makes for a richer, creamier product.

The first thing Viola did after Lowell brought her the raw milk was strain it to trap debris and any stray hair from the cow. She said you could use a fine metal strainer or some type of porous cloth, such

dipper and put into a separate container. I asked how to tell if you're skimming just the cream and not the milk. Viola explained that the cream is a different color, more of a pale yellow instead of pure white. She kept the cream refrigerated until she had saved at least a gallon. When she has the required amount, she takes the container out and lets it set at room temperature for a few days. The cream is then poured into some type of churn.

For this interview at Skylark, Viola used a ceramic churn with a wooden "dasher," a long wooden handle with a four-sided flat bottom that is moved in an up/down motion to make the butter "come." There are also wooden churns as well as the smaller glass one that Viola used on my second visit. This one had an inside paddle that is hand-cranked once the lid is screwed on. Electric churns are also available but Viola said they whip the butter, making the consistency different than the hand-dashed or hand-cranked varieties.

Viola rinsed the end of the wooden dasher in water before placing it in the churn. The ceramic lid has a hole in the top where the dasher handle is inserted and the churning begins. When asked how long it takes before the cream is transformed into butter, Viola says it can vary. She started the process at ten minutes after ten that morning and was amazed that at twenty till eleven the butter was ready



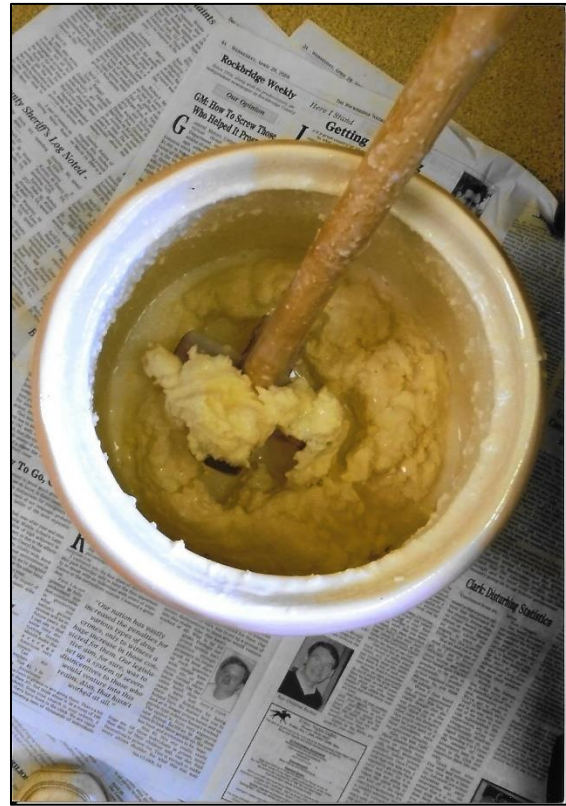
Viola showing how to hand-churn cream into butter

I volunteered to do some of the churning and as we sat there talking congenially, Viola explained that the butter from their Brown Swiss cow is a lighter color than some of the other breeds. She says she makes butter about two to three times a week, making several pounds at each churning. I asked how my husband's favorite childhood treat, clabbered milk, was made and Viola said the clotted substance came from unrefrigerated milk that the cream has been taken off of and

set out at room temperature until it thickens. She told the story of her mother, Ivetta Allen Mays, making butter and wrapping it up in cheesecloth, which was then put into a gallon crock and salted before putting the container in the cold water of the springhouse. These were the days before freezers but Viola said that butter kept this way could be preserved all winter long and taken out when needed.



Unchurned cream in the ceramic crock



Butter gathering on the wooden dasher

As I began churning, I noticed the consistency of the cream becoming much thicker than when we started. After about thirty minutes, the cream had a “slushy” feel to it and specks of butter began to appear on the wooden dasher handle. When Viola removed the top of the churn, the cream had suddenly become clumps of yellow butter floating in the milk. Viola began to work the dasher around, calling this procedure “gathering” the butter together. With a wide slotted spoon, she then lifted the butter into a clean container. The milk that is left is called buttermilk.

Salt is added to the clump of butter and then it is rinsed in very cold water, which brings out the rest of the milk. This is done repeatedly until the water runs clear. The water was poured off and Viola made a ball out of the butter and worked it until as much of the liquid could be squeezed out. She salts it again to taste but if too much is added by mistake, all that is needed is to rinse it again and start over. A teaspoon was given to me so I could “sample” the finished product and I have to say, it was delicious! Hand churned cow butter is fresher and better tasting than the kind that is bought at the grocery store.



Spooning out the finished butter



Viola pouring off the buttermilk



Rinsing the butter with water

Viola then tore off squares of waxed paper which she laid on her kitchen counter and placed flattened balls of butter on them. They were wrapped and placed in the freezer until needed. Once frozen, Viola takes them out of the waxed paper and puts the butter into Ziploc bags or Saran Wrap. When fresh butter is needed, all that has to be done is to thaw the amount wanted.

I was really excited to be a part of Viola's butter making process but she explained with a smile that the best part was yet to come. She toasted several pieces of bread in her toaster and then handed me one and showed me how to "sop-up" the leftover butter still in the bowl. Yum, was it good! Not only did I get to help make the butter but was rewarded with several one-pound pats and a gallon of buttermilk to take home.

As I recorded the butter making process in writing and photographs, Viola said it was a bittersweet day for her. Although it was my first-time making butter, she explained it would be her last. A combination of moving to a new home after she and Lowell retire as caretakers of Skylark Farm at the end of May 2009, the family cow was to be sold and the twice a day milking would come to an end. How thankful I was that Viola invited me to her house to record and preserve an old-time activity that not too many people are privy to see in this day and time and yet was once a daily activity just a few generations back.



Finished butter wrapped in waxed paper



One-pound pats packaged for the freezer

Lynn's Note: Just when I thought this was the end of Lowell and Viola Humphreys' butter making, it wasn't long after they retired and moved to their new house on Painter Mountain that they bought a sweet Guernsey cow with a calf and resumed making butter; this time with a hand cranked table churn and a wooden butter press to mold a flower motif into the finished butter pats.



Flower motif embedded into the butter pat

Today there is a resurgence of self-sufficient living and people are finding ways to incorporate healthy, homemade foods into their diets the same way their grandmothers did. One taste of the Humphreys' hand-churned cow butter will convince anyone that some of the old mountain ways are still the best ways!



Viola Humphreys making butter with her glass, hand-cranked churn