


Milk It

Camel milk has been a vital part of Bedouin, nomad and Arab cultures for centuries, and thanks to its recent use in modern recipes, this wholesome and nutritious option could be the next big thing in food. We take a closer look...

By Yi-Hwa Hanna



With the ever-growing popularity of alternative milks now widely available, cow's milk seems to have had its heyday. But there's yet another option out there that's so packed with nutrients that it could knock other "mylks" off their pedestal, and it all started right here in the Middle East. Moove over (sorry, we couldn't resist) shelf-hogs: Camel milk is having a moment.

The list of accolades bestowed upon it are pretty long: For starters, it's lower in lactose than cow's milk, making it an easier choice for those who aren't necessarily lactose intolerant, but do find themselves more sensitive to such dairy products. Naturally up to 50% lower in fat than cow's milk, it's also a natural probiotic, which means it's a great way to keep up those essential levels of healthy bacteria in your gut.

But we're not trying to get on cow milk's case here. Camel milk is also crammed with nutrients: High in protein, potassium and iron, camel milk is also packed with calcium and Vitamin B1, and contains three times more Vitamin C than cow's milk. Another awesome benefit? Its high insulin content makes it a strong choice for people with Type 1 and Type 2 Diabetes, according to experts, and it's also been described as the closest thing possible to mother's milk.

Eat Smart

So what does all this goodness mean for us? According to experts, the high levels of protein and its antimicrobial properties mean that camel milk can be an excellent way to boost your immune system, while its high protein and calcium content has been lauded for its potential to help keep bones and muscles strong. In fact, so high is the antimicrobial power of camel milk, its potential role in helping to mitigate the symptoms of autism has been a hot topic of late, with the verdict still out thanks to ongoing scientific research on the subject. Thanks to its high iron levels—said to be 10 times higher than that of cow's milk—it's also said to be excellent for boosting circulation. In this region, it's also easier to find locally-sourced versions than it is elsewhere in the world, an asset that's been picked up on by local companies such as Camelicious, or the Emirates Industry for Camel Milk & Products (EICMP).

Hump Day

A project that has been in the works for 25 years and counting, the EICMP released Camelicious products across UAE shelves in the summer of 2006, and, as its website states, is the “most advanced and first fully-integrated camel milk production facility in the world.” The operation, which boasts its own camel farm among the milking plant, research and production facilities, fulfils strict EU export requirements, and was the first camel milk production facility worldwide to receive EU Commission approval to export its products to the EU zone in 2013.

Clearly, they were on to something: In 2006, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) presented camel milk as the next big

potential food hero, not just because of its health benefits but also thanks to its market potential. Camelicious's products can now be found in more than 21 retailers in the UK, with plans to expand further at a rapid pace, and they offer everything from plain and flavoured camel milk to cheeses, fresh laban, camel milk powder and even camel milk whey powder. It doesn't just stop at the imbibable stuff, either—UAE-born café franchise Café2Go boasts an entire “Camellos” menu, featuring everything from a range of camel coffees (that includes Camel-Chinos and Camel-Lattes) to camel milk-

based gelato, yoghurt, shakes and smoothies, and sandwiches, burgers and fajitas featuring camel meat and camel cheese. Camel burgers, often presented as a local delicacy, are available in Local House restaurants and other popular outlets. Chocolate more your thing? Al Nassma, another UAE-based company, are now the go-to for gourmet camel milk chocolates, with everything from pralines and chocolate bars to hollow figures (in the shape of camels, natch) on offer, blended with ingredients like nuts, honey, bourbon vanilla and nougat.

So what does it taste like? Slightly saltier than cow's milk with a creamier and thicker consistency, it lends itself well to a plethora of recipes (note to all bakers: If you've ever struggled to find a buttermilk substitute, this could be your ultimate solution). As for the cheese, we liken it to a halloumi, firm to the touch with

an assertive texture reminiscent of goat's cheese. The gelato, so similar in texture to “regular” versions that you'd hardly be able to tell the difference, is lent a creamier, richer feel. When it comes to the meat, it is rather fibrous, and can be somewhat tough, but restaurants currently serving it up have found a way to make it more tender and, as such, the results are a rich and flavourful option that lends itself well to recipes like burgers and fajitas.

Beauty Booster

Camel milk also boasts a high antioxidant level, which makes it great for helping the body fight free radicals—a trait that could not only make it a great addition to your beauty regime for its anti-ageing properties, but one that has also been found to help improve behavioural and cognitive patterns, according to various studies. On another

Got the hump with cow's milk-based dairy? Consider giving camel milk a try...



High in protein, camel milk is also packed with calcium and contains three times more Vitamin C than cow's milk.



Want to try your hand at cooking with camel milk? It isn't all camel coffees and ready-to-buy chocolates. Here's a recipe from Qbara, one of the UAE's finest restaurants that takes pride in using locally sourced ingredients and flavours, that's bound to get your taste buds smiling...

CAMEL MILK MAHALABIYA WITH RASPBERRY JELLY

100g camel milk
100g full fat cow's milk
200g whipping cream
60g sugar
2g corn flour
2 cardamom pods
30g rosewater
1g mastic
1 sheet gelatine

To make the Raspberry Jelly

200ml raspberry juice
100g raspberries, roughly chopped
80g demerara sugar
1½ sheets gelatine

Directions

1. Begin by making the mahalabiya. Grind the cardamom seeds and mastic granules into a fine powder.
2. Place into a saucepan with the sugar and the milk.
3. Make a custard by adding a small amount of milk, around 20ml, to the corn flour, then whisk into the pan of milk and cream. Slowly bring to the boil over a low heat, until thickened and no longer starchy.
4. Meanwhile, soak the sheet of gelatine in iced water until bloomed. Squeeze out the excess water and add to the custard.
5. Lastly, add the rosewater and mix well using a hand blender.
6. Fill 6 serving glasses about ¼ full with the mixture.
7. Place the glasses into the refrigerator until the custard has set. Leave the remainder aside. In the meantime, prepare the jelly. Gently heat the juice with sugar in a pan until the sugar has fully dissolved.
8. Soak gelatine in iced water until bloomed. Squeeze out the excess water.
9. Remove the pan from the heat and mix in the gelatine with a whisk. Pass through a sieve. Allow to cool before pouring on the mahalabiya.
10. Pour a thin layer of raspberry jelly onto the set mahalabiya. Add the fresh raspberries and refrigerate until set, about two hours.
11. Add the remainder of the mahalabiya mixture on top of the jelly and refrigerate until fully set. Serve with chopped pistachios.

Makes 6 servings

To learn more or to make a reservation, visit qbara.ae.

beauty-related note, camel milk is also rich in alpha-hydroxy acids, which help to make skin soft and supple, fight wrinkles and sagging, and generally help to rejuvenate the skin. It's no wonder, then, that both the local and international beauty industry are starting to pick up on the potential of camel milk's use as a cosmetic ingredient, with camel milk soaps now quickly becoming a commodity so widely available you can even buy it from large-scale, mass-market retailers such as Carrefour. And it doesn't just stop at soap: Camelicious—which is now also a purveyor of camel milk soap, naturally—even debuted a range of camel milk-based shampoos earlier this year. Branded under their new beauty and personal care line, "Camellure," the products were presented as premium level items at high-impact international trade fair Beauty World Middle East 2015. There's even been some talk of the milk's foray into sun care.

Bedouins Knew Best

With so much buzz surrounding the product, we have to wonder: Can camel milk do no wrong? Aside from its palatability—which some would say is an acquired taste—or the uncertainty that could stem from the very idea of drinking milk from a camel (a fine beast, no doubt, but one that society does not typically tend to associate with milk or milk products) there have, as yet, been no reported negative side effects to the consumption of camel milk. As with most healthy food options out there, whether it's right for you is a question of how well it works for your individual dietary needs—just make sure it's from a reputable source that keeps healthy camels. Whether it's a medical and nutritional marvel has yet to be seen, but with this many great properties and avid testimonials on its health benefits, it looks like the Bedouins may have been onto something special all along. ■

HOW DOES YOUR FAVOURITE MILK STACK UP?

 <p>Camel</p>	Approx. 107 calories per cup, camel milk contains 10 times as much iron and three times as much vitamin C as cow's milk. It's also high in iron, protein, calcium and antioxidants, with impressive antimicrobial properties.
 <p>Cow</p>	Approx. 146 calories per cup (of whole milk), while cow's milk is high in fat and contains lactose, it can still be a great source of protein, Vitamins A, D, and B-12, and potassium, magnesium, zinc, phosphorus and calcium.
 <p>Goat</p>	Approx. 160 calories per cup, raw and grass-fed versions are abundant in probiotics, helping to promote healthy gut flora. It's lower in lactose than cow's milk, and is easier to digest. It's also high in calcium and low in cholesterol.
 <p>Rice</p>	Approx. 70 calories per cup, this is the third most popular nondairy alternative to milk aside from soy and almond. Rich in Vitamin B, magnesium, phosphorus and manganese, it's lactose free but can be high in carbs.
 <p>Almond</p>	Approx. 40 calories per cup, fortified versions can offer as much calcium and Vitamin D as cow's milk, as well as other nutrients. It's low in saturated fat and cholesterol, but its tyrosine levels may negatively affect thyroid hormones.
 <p>Soy</p>	Approx. 80 calories per cup, while this soybean-derived beverage is packed with nutrients and boasts low saturated fat and cholesterol, it has come under fire for its deleterious effects on thyroid and fertility hormones and digestion.
 <p>Coconut</p>	Approx. 45 calories per cup, it's creamy and sweet, and is extracted from mature coconut meat. It's been linked to improved cognitive ability, but has a high saturated fat content. Choose one that comes in boxes, not tins or cans.

*Approximations are based on an 237ml, or 8oz, 1 cup measurement, of unsweetened versions of each beverage.