

Shavuot in the land of milk and honey—mostly milk

By HILLEL KUTTLER

THE BASHER CHEESE SHOP in Tel Aviv's upscale Sarona Market was quiet on an early spring afternoon, with just an occasional customer stopping in.

Its pace will change dramatically shortly before Shavuot begins on Saturday night, June 8. In the preceding four days, each of Bashar's eight shops around Israel will set up two outdoor kiosks to handle the expected pre-holiday rush. The company typically sells as much in those four days as it does in a month, said Neta Karmon, assistant manager of the Sarona branch.

"Some holidays, you eat meat. Others, you drink wine. Shavuot is our holiday. This is the one for dairy," she said.

Shavuot, which means *weeks*, celebrates the Jews' receiving the Torah at Mt. Sinai seven weeks after the exodus from Egypt. Because the newly received laws included many related to the kashrut of meat, the Jews, according to the Mishnah Berura, opted to eat less-restrictive dairy meals. That tradition continues being observed by Jews worldwide, along with Shavuot's all-night study sessions to celebrate the receiving of the Torah.

In Israel, Jews, regardless of observance level, embrace the holiday spirit. Many people wear white clothing and purchase flowers to beautify homes and synagogues. Newspapers contain booklets with dairy recipes.

On kibbutzim and moshavim, agriculture-themed plays are staged outdoors to celebrate Shavuot's roots as a harvest festival; a staple of those performances is the prominent appearance of bales of hay. Most such farms have dairy operations that host tourists on Passover's intermediate days and before Shavuot. Some let visitors milk cows, and dairy fairs and cheese tastings are common sights.

Throughout modern Israel's history, domestically produced dairy products—notably whole milk, chocolate milk, yogurt, cottage cheese, *lebeneh* (a sour cream/cream cheese blend), and yellow cheese—have been a source of pride for the country's residents. "The milk, produced by the Holstein herd, is excellent," CBS's Edward R. Murrow reported on his February 1, 1956, radio broadcast

preceding Shavuot, said Michal Betzer, Tnuva's daily nutrition marketing manager.

To promote sales and answer consumers' questions, Tnuva sends its employees to stores at Shavuot time. They offer samples and point the way to certain soft and cream cheeses for cheesecakes, and salty and yellow cheeses for quiche or lasagna, Betzer said.

Shavuot is "a big, festive holiday

and-cheese samplings preceding dinner. Bashar's Karmon sees customers buying ricotta for cheese balls, cheesecake, and such pastry dishes as borekas; and Bulgarian and feta cheeses for Greek salad. For dips, the Brie-like Camembert is increasingly popular; Gruyere is great for casseroles and for French onion soup, she said.

The cheeses Betzer and Karmon mentioned are imported from Europe, all kosher.

Still, said Lenny Kaplan, a consultant to many Israeli dairy operations, sales should be even higher year-round given the population rise. The country's production-quota system, like Canada's, suppresses prices, he said, and the vegan movement has taken a bite, too.

Kibbutz Maale Gilboa, where the Los Angeles-raised Kaplan lives and whose dairy he managed for 18 years, likely will sell 500,000 fewer liters of milk in 2019, compared to 4.5 million liters last year—a "dramatic" drop, he said.

"The dairy business in Israel is doing very well. It's not on the verge of collapsing, but we're going into an era when we'll probably be making less money. There's a lot of concern," he said.

The big picture won't be registering at the Rehovot home of Lavie's mother, Yudit. That's where the extended family traditionally gathers for dinner as Shavuot opens. Everyone brings homemade dishes for the buffet: quiche, salad, bread, blintzes, and cheesecake.

Lavie likes to bring two or three quiches, an equal number of cheesecakes, and even glasses of sorbet or tiramisu. Last year, she made cheesecake popsicles and sandwich cookies filled with caramel.

"I love the preparation," she said. "Otherwise, it's not fun." ■

Hillel Kuttler's feature articles have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Wall Street Journal.



Inbal Lavie with her Alfajores Cheesecake.

Photo credit: Dan Perez.

"Some holidays, you eat meat. Others, you drink wine. Shavuot is our holiday. This is the one for dairy."

from a Negev kibbutz.

All the more so, apparently, around Shavuot. According to a dairy-industry source, 38 million shekels (more than \$10.5 million) in sales of cream occur during the month preceding Shavuot, a 59 percent increase over average monthly sales.

The most popular creams in that period tend to be whipping cream (38 percent) and cooking cream (32 percent), and even non-dairy cream accounts for 15 percent, the source said.

Tnuva, Israel's mammoth dairy cooperative, likely will see a 67 percent increase in sales of its dairy products, to 250 million shekels (nearly \$70 million), in the week

for Tnuva," she said.

It's also prompting culinary creativity. Israelis "are investing time and effort to prepare more complicated recipes" for the holiday, said Inbal Lavie, a Tel Aviv-area chef and food blogger. "I've noticed that people want to impress."

The opening in Israel of more cooking- and baking-supply stores and the wider culinary possibilities the Internet offers are partly responsible, Lavie said.

Tnuva's Betzer thinks that Israelis' dairy palates have become "more sophisticated." For example, she said, Roquefort and Gouda are now popular for wine-