



the Milky trail



If anyone should doubt that Eretz Yisrael is a land flowing with milk and honey, a visit to the Tnuva Dairy at Alon Tabor will set them straight. For as the old adage goes, the proof is in the pudding



The day is relatively quiet. As our car makes its way north on a balmy Thursday afternoon, no traffic jams or blaring horns disrupt the peace. Even the valley of Megiddo seems to be dozing in the warm Israeli sun, with nary a tractor in sight to disturb the wheat fields stretching across the plain where fierce armies once stood. But once we arrive at our destination, an industrial park located near yet another Biblical site, Har Tabor, the tempo quickly changes.

Relax? Before the Nine Days? Here? *Fuhgeddaboutit!* as a New Yorker might say. Because “here” is Alon Tabor, site of a Tnuva dairy that is not only the largest dairy in Israel, but also the entire Middle East. And as the Nine Days approach, and consumption of milchigs about to soar, this mega state-of-the-art dairy is milking each day for all it’s worth.

HIGH-TECH IN A CUP

People have been making cheese and other dairy products for thousands of years, but were someone from the time of Avraham Avinu to take a tour of this dairy, they very likely would be more than a little confused. For one thing, there are no cows — or goats, for that matter. For another, there are practically no people.

“The entire process is mechanized,” explains Ronen Kotzer, the Alon Tabor dairy’s food engineer quality manager. Ronen is our tour guide this afternoon, although that’s not his usual job. Most visitors to the dairy have to be content with a presentation and just a glimpse of part of the production floor, but Tnuva has agreed to let *Mishpacha* get a behind-the-scenes look at the entire process. And no one knows more about what

goes into making a yogurt or cottage cheese than Ronen.

Before we begin, though, we have to don special hairnets and white coats. Then our hands, and even our shoes, have to be disinfected. In addition to these health and safety precautions, a sign for employees warns that, among other things, no jewelry is allowed on the production floor. After all, no one would want to find a stray earring in their chocolate pudding.

This is my first glimpse into the many precautions that Tnuva, Israel’s largest food company (a majority stake of which was recently purchased by a Chinese conglomerate), has put in place to ensure that its products don’t just taste good, but are absolutely safe.

When we walk through the doors leading to the production floor, we’re standing at the beginning of the process. I’m still looking for the cows, so Ronen explains that Tnuva gets its milk from hundreds of kibbutzim and moshavim, all of which are supervised by Tnuva *mashgichim* who are part of the kashrus team headed by Rav Zev Weitman, Tnuva’s *rav hamachshir*.

Ronen explains that this particular factory is for dairy products that are packaged in a cup, i.e., yogurts, puddings, cottage cheese, cream cheese, and the like. Hard cheeses are made at the dairy in Tel Yosef, in the Jezreel Valley. Soft cheeses, such as feta cheeses, are made at the dairy in Kiryat Malachi, not far from Ashdod. The Rechovot dairy, which also has a visitors’ center that offers tours, is the production site for all of Tnuva’s milk products.

The reason I don’t see any milk anywhere, explains Ronen, is because all the raw milk enters the plant through a large pipeline. Its first stop is an onsite lab, where samples are checked to make sure the milk is absolutely safe for consumption (the raw milk also has been tested several times on the dairy farms, before it even reaches the Tnuva dairy). Then the milk is stored until

needed. We, on the other hand, are in the area where the dry ingredients are stored: things like cocoa powder, sugar, and salt. These ingredients will be mixed with the milk, but if you’re conjuring up a vision of a battalion of strong-armed workers stirring large vats of pudding batter, all I can say is, “Welcome to the 21st century.”

“All of the recipes are controlled by the computer,” Ronen says. “The computer program determines how much sugar or cocoa powder to put in the pipeline that goes to the blender, how much milk and other ingredients, how long the blender will stir the ingredients.” Ronen adds that everything gets cleaned automatically after a production run is finished, since those instructions are also programmed into the computer — a feature that I’d like to have in my kitchen!

Only a few key people have access to the computer programs that control every step of the process. Tnuva doesn’t want just anyone to tamper with a recipe because in their opinion a product needs a little more sugar. Food-related terrorism is also a concern in our day and age, and so Tnuva isn’t taking any chances. Even if an unauthorized person managed to get onto the production floor, there is little he could do. There are no open vats or pipes anywhere, and the computers on the production floors are for leaving comments, in case a worker has a question or spots a potential problem. A regular employee can’t access the programs that control the dairy’s operations and fiddle with the complex automated network of pumps and valves.

And, of course, there is another reason why security is so tight: kashrus.

KASHRUS FOR ALL

During the tour, we are joined by two members of the dairy’s kashrus team: Yaakov Borow, who introduces himself as Rav Zev Weitman’s ingredient man, and Tzvi Aginsky, a senior Tnuva *mashgiach*.

Although all the raw milk that enters the



Pasta with Green Peas, Roasted Cherry Tomatoes, and Feta Cheese

The combo of cherry tomatoes, green peas, and Bulgarian-style feta cheese on your favorite pasta is sure to please your entire family!

- 1 16-oz package pasta**
- olive oil, for frying**
- 2 cups cherry tomatoes**
- 1 cup frozen peas, cooked according to package instructions, or 1 cup canned peas**
- 1 chili pepper, chopped (optional)**
- sea salt, to taste**
- freshly ground black pepper, to taste**
- 1 handful fresh basil leaves**
- 1 package Tnuva Feta or Feta Light Cheese, crumbled**

Place a frying pan over medium heat. Once the pan is hot, add a little olive oil and the tomatoes. Reduce to a low flame and roast the tomatoes until they are browned. Alternatively, preheat oven to 300°F and place the tomatoes on a tray lined with parchment paper. Roast the tomatoes in the oven for about 1 hour.

Prepare the pasta. Once cooked, drain well and return to the pot. Add the peas, tomatoes, and chili pepper to the pot. Season with salt and pepper. Immediately before serving, drizzle a little extra olive oil onto the pasta and top with fresh basil and feta cheese.

dairy is *chalav Yisrael*, only some of the final products get Tnuva's Vaad Mehadrin *hechsher*. The kashrus team must therefore keep a watchful eye on everything that comes into the dairy — the enzymes, stabilizers, colors, flavorings, proteins, and souring agents, to name just some of the concerns — as well as make sure that only *mehadrin* ingredients are added to the company's *mehadrin* products.

Yaakov, who is already working on finding

suitable ingredients for next year's Pesach products, works closely with the company's Vaad Mehadrin to get the proper authorization for each and every ingredient.

The *vaad*, which operates under directives established by Rav Elyashiv *ztz"l* and, *yibadel l'chayim*, Rav Vosner *shlita* and is headed by Rav Mordechai Gross, is unique, says Yaakov. "It exemplifies the principle of unity. Representatives from all segments of the chareidi community are on



Salad with Fried Goat Cheese

Enjoy a garden-fresh salad with crispy slices of rich goat cheese — a perfect start to a hearty milchig meal.

- 1 package fresh arugula, rinsed and checked**
- 1 pear, cored and thinly sliced**
- 1 handful walnuts, halved and roasted**
- 1 package Tnuva Goat Cheese, sliced into ½-inch rounds**
- 1 egg**
- 1 cup bread crumbs**
- olive oil, for frying**

DRESSING

- juice from 1 lemon**
- olive oil**
- 1 tsp honey**
- sea salt, to taste**
- freshly ground pepper, to taste**

Place the arugula, pear slices, and walnuts in a large bowl.

Prepare the cheese slices: Place the bread crumbs in a bowl and season with fresh ground pepper. Heat a little olive oil in a small frying pan. Once the pan is hot, coat the goat cheese rounds with bread crumbs and fry the cheese slices until golden. Transfer the fried cheese slices onto a plate lined with paper towels.

To prepare the dressing, mix lemon juice, olive oil, honey, salt, and pepper. Toss the salad with the dressing; taste and adjust the seasonings.

Plate the salad on individual serving plates and arrange several cheese slices over each salad. Serve immediately.

the *vaad* — *litvish, chassidish*, Sephardim — and they are all very actively involved. The *rabbanim* have their own people who will come to the factory, and the *rabbanin* will make visits as well. And the decision has to be unanimous for every ingredient and every step in the process. This means that the kashrus level at Tnuva meets the highest standard for everyone. Our *hechsher* is no rubber stamp."

Tzvi's job is to supervise what goes on inside the dairy. He also has years of experience working in the field, and he will still make visits to the farms that provide Tnuva's milk, along with Tnuva's other *mashgi-chim*, even though all the farms are equipped with cameras that keep a watchful eye over the milking. Tzvi adds that every cow on every farm has a bar code, so that its milk can be tracked every step of the way. The cow's records will also show if it has undergone surgery. If a cow does need surgery, a specially trained *mashgiach* will be present while the operation is performed. Should anything go wrong and make the cow (and therefore its milk) *treif*, the cow is removed from the herd.

In addition to knowing about cows, Tzvi has to be a computer maven. "The *mashgiach* has to understand what he is seeing on the computer screen, how the automation works, so that a technician can't come along and override a decision pertaining to kashrus," he explains.

However, both he and Yaakov agree that the chance of a technician knowingly doing

such a thing is practically nil. "The philosophy at Tnuva is to work together and to prevent problems from happening," says Yaakov. "I work closely with the R&D [research and development] team that develops new products. They don't want to invest time and money in developing a product that has a problematic ingredient, so they make sure I'm fully involved from the beginning."

AMERICAN CHEESE

Israelis love dairy products — they consume more cottage cheese per person than anyone else in the world. Tnuva has been providing them with dairy products since 1926, and in 2005 they entered the North American market as well. Gidon Katz, vice president of the media firm IMP, comments, "It's not so simple for an Israeli company to export its products. If you sign an agreement with a distributor, the products then belong to the distributor, who can do what he wants, including sell a product after the expiration date or store it in a freezer for a few months. Because Tnuva cares about maintaining the quality of its brand, they decided to open up their own distribution company, Tnuva USA. This way they can keep watch over their products from the time they leave Eretz Yisrael to the time they reach the store shelf."

Katz adds that only products that carry the Tnuva Vaad Mehadrin *hechsher* are sold in North America. Although Tnuva's most popular product — cottage cheese — isn't yet available in the US and Canada,

Americans can get a taste of Eretz Yisrael during the Nine Days by serving some of the company's quark soft cheeses, hard and feta cheeses, cheese spreads, *labanes*, and puddings.

FILL 'ER UP

Back in Alon Tabor, Ronen leads us past a row of large vats where the cottage cheese curds are having a bath. We then go down to the "filling floor."

We're almost at the end of the tour, since the filling floor is where the products get packaged and sealed. Yet there are still a few more steps before they can go out into the world. While the sealed cups are still on the filling floor's conveyor belts, they have to pass through a metal detector to make sure that a stray part of machinery — or an earring — hasn't fallen into one of the puddings or yogurts by mistake. Then a sample from each and every batch is taken up to the lab for one final check. "There hasn't been a recall of one of our products in many, many years," says Ronen, with justifiable pride.

We watch as sealed packages are stacked in plastic crates and then placed on a pallet. The crates are then whisked away to cold storage, where they stay until they are loaded onto the truck that will deliver them to the stores. Until this point, the cheeses and puddings haven't been touched by human hands. But once it gets to your home, there will be plenty of little people eager to dig in. ☺

Chocolate Coconut Squares

This simple-to-prepare dessert brings a bold sweetness into any occasion

- 7 Tbsp Tnuva butter**
- 1½ cups plain vanilla cookies, crumbled**
- ½ cup dark chocolate, chopped**
- 1 cup pecans, coarsely chopped**
- 1 cup shredded coconut**
- 1 small can condensed milk**

Preheat oven to 325°F and grease a loaf pan.

In a small bowl, mix the butter and cookie crumbs. Place the mixture into the loaf pan and pat down tightly. Sprinkle the chocolate pieces, pecans and shredded coconut evenly over the cookie base. Pour the condensed milk over the top layer and bake for 30 minutes. Let cool before serving.

Enjoy!

