

Daily spread

There are two main types of butter: sweet cream and lactic. Sweet cream butter, which is made from fresh cream, has a close texture and a delicate creamy flavour – almost all English, Welsh, Irish, Australian and New Zealand butter is sweet cream. Lactic butter has a small proportion of sour cream added to the cream before it's churned to give a richer flavour and a slightly waxy texture. Danish, Dutch, French and German butters are mostly lactic. Both types may be salted or unsalted with variations in the degrees of saltiness according to the manufacturer and consumer taste. Unless butter is actually labelled

"unsalted" you can take it that it is salted, which means that it contains more than 3 per cent salt. Blended butters, which are made from two or more butters of different origin, tend to be cheaper but the flavour is apt to vary from batch to batch. Supermarkets "own brand" butters are usually blended but the label need not state the proportion of imported butter or give the country or countries of origin. The colour of butter can vary from pale cream to a quite deep golden yellow, according to the breed of cow and the pasture on which it was grazed. The natural colour of butter comes from carotene, found in grass

and green vegetables, which is why some summer butter (from rich summer pastures) is yellower than butter produced in winter. This isn't true of butter in Australia and New Zealand where good grazing is available throughout the year, so that the butter colour rarely varies. In northern European countries like Denmark though, the butter tends to be pale because modern farming techniques have brought cows indoors and outdoor grazing is rare. Butter can be coloured with annatto and turmeric but these are rarely used. Sweet cream butter keeps longer than lactic butter, and salted butter keeps longer than unsalted. Butter can be stored for 3–4 days in a cool larder, and will keep fresh for up to 6 weeks in a fridge. As a standby it also has a place in the freezer, but do wrap it well in heavy-duty polythene. Freezer life is 6 months, and to use it just leave it in the fridge to thaw. Strong light is a natural enemy of butter as it is of milk, and it can affect the flavour and destroy part of its vitamin content. Always store it in a dark place and cover it, as it picks up flavours from other foods.

Left: an array of butter shapes and tastes to make at home for an attractive presentation

