

Chef's Corner: Cypriot Tzatziki (Bonus Feature!)

February 2020

This “Bonus Feature” was prepared and served as an accompaniment to the Cypriot Venison Meatballs at the VBAC 60th Annual Awards Banquet and is Angler-tested and Club-approved!

Tzatziki is a refreshing dip essential to cuisines of Southeast Europe and the Middle East. It reflects the legacy of the Ottoman Empire which once controlled the island country of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea which is home to my Greek ancestors and many current relatives.

It is an excellent side dish for classic Greek Kebabs, Falafel, Souvlaki, Gyros – and of course, Keftedes – which is the featured recipe of the month.

Tzatziki is a popular appetizer, or “Meze” that combines simple ingredients and appeals to the most discriminating palate!

Cypriot Tzatziki Dip

Ingredients:

- 1 large cucumber, unpeeled
- 1 1/2 cups plain full-fat Greek yogurt (use 2 cups for a less intense flavor if desired)
- 2-3 large garlic cloves, finely minced (I like to crush mine to a paste in a mortar and pestle)
- 2 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 Tablespoon lemon juice (more or less to taste)
- 1 Teaspoon salt (you can always add a pinch more to taste!)
- 1 Teaspoon fresh ground black pepper
- 2 Tablespoons fresh mint, finely chopped (can substitute fresh dill if desired – I like the mint!)

Instructions:

Crush the garlic to release the oils and finely mince or grind to a paste (I like to use the salt to soak up the oils).

Grate the cucumber and drain through a fine mesh sieve overnight in the fridge.

Combine the yogurt, garlic, olive oil, lemon, and spices in a large bowl. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Transfer the grated cucumber and fresh dill to the melded yogurt mixture and stir to combine.

Serve chilled with pita bread for dipping.



Tzatziki with a Mint Garnish and Pita Bread.



Melding the yogurt, garlic, oil, lemon, and spices.



Grating the Cucumber.



Draining Grated Cucumber.

Tzatziki Tips:

- Make sure your grated cucumber is well-drained. If you have time, you can drain it in cheesecloth or a fine mesh sieve overnight. If it's too soggy, the dip will be a bit runny and may not achieve that desired creamy texture.
- If you're in a rush, you can use your hands to squeeze the liquid out of the cucumber by pressing it in the strainer.
- Full-fat Greek yogurt is best, but for the calorie conscious, low- or non-fat yogurt can be used if you sacrifice a little texture – just be sure to drain all water/liquid in either case!
- Use the salt to absorb any residual garlic oil from the cutting board or mortar and pestle – that's the good stuff!
- The longer the garlic “rests” in the yogurt, the less sharp bite it will have and the better it will taste as the garlic melds with the yogurt, oil, and spices. I generally refrigerate for 3 or 4 days before serving!
- For best results, combine all of the ingredients except for the cucumber and mint (or dill), then let it rest overnight in the fridge while your cucumber is draining.
- If you want to kick-in another super food, try adding some fresh avocado to this recipe – it is excellent!
- Add the mint or dill at the last minute so it doesn't overwhelm the rest of the flavors.
- Vinegar may be substituted for lemon, but Islanders love lemon, which also adds a dose of Vitamin C to the dip!
- Toasting the pita bread and/or using pita chips makes dipping easier!
- Can also serve as dressing for classic chicken, lamb, or pork Kebabs in folded pitas with a nice Greek Salata!
- This recipe is extremely flexible and does not require strict adherence – best to start small and add as you go so you can tweak to your particular taste – especially with the garlic, mint, avocado, and/or dill!

Health Benefits of Tzatziki

Tzatziki's tangy flavor is a good counterpoint to grilled meat. Tzatziki also makes for a healthy, yogurt-based dip for vegetable sticks or pita chips. It also works well as a salad dressing.

Greek Yogurt is an excellent source of calcium and protein.

Health benefits of yogurt go beyond the benefits of milk since the Yogurt is a fermented food, made by introducing bacterial cultures to warm milk. These bacteria act as probiotics because they help support a healthy, diverse balance of microbiota in your gut.

The Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPH) lists Type 2 diabetes, obesity, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), and chronic inflammatory conditions like rheumatoid arthritis and Crohn's disease as some of the health problems that can result from a lower-than-optimal level of probiotics in the gut.

According to the HSPH, yogurt also improves weight management.

Tzatziki is compatible with low-carb diets like the keto diet and the Atkins diet since it is inherently low in carbs (only about 3 grams of carbs per serving).

The American Heart Association lists a variation of the traditional tzatziki recipe that includes chopped fresh mint, lemon juice, and chunks of avocado. While my recipe uses mint and lemon, the AHA version has more nutrition and calories than the original recipe due to the addition of avocado.

The avocado adds around 60 calories per serving according to the USDA, but these calories are accompanied by nutrients like Omega-3 Fatty Acids, Fiber, Potassium, Folate, and Vitamins A and C.



Falafel in a Pita with Tzatziki Sauce!



Gyros in a Pita with Tzatziki Sauce!



Tzatziki is a great dip for a hearty Veggie Tray!

Be sure to check out the Cypriot Venison Meatball companion recipe for this delicious condiment in the CHAC Chef's Corner. This really is a great way to compliment the ground venison Keftedes, and it is well worth the effort!

Dips-Ahoy!

Contributed by CHAC member John Germanos (aka "The Instinctive Chef")

