Would that be camel or flex with your coffee?
A health-minded Tamar Adler investigates the wide, wild world of alternmilks.
Photographed by Grant Cornett.
MILKING IT
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lactose-intolerant children. Camel's milk contains five times the vitamin C of cow's milk and plenty of immune-boosting immunoglobulins. I order six pints—$12 per. I also find camel colostrum from a company called Camilk, for $70 an eightounce bottle. It contains stratospheric levels of immune boosters, plus high concentrations of vitamins B and D. I vacillate, brooding about the well-being of newborn camels robbed of colostrum. By the time I muster the coldheartedness, Camilk is sold out. (I later receive an email from the company explaining that it sells only unused, excess colostrum from camel mothers.) I get sheep's milk from a creamery called Haverton Hill in California and goat's milk from Windsor, Vermont.

For plant milks, I withdraw to the store of a local biodynamic farm and let boxes fall into my shopping cart like dominoes. More nut and grain milks arrive over the following days—from California, Connecticut, Sweden, Queens. I also get a Joyo Soy milk maker with timer ($229) and a SoyaJoy soy milk and soup maker ($130)—in case homemade turns out to be best. (For the record, for only $497 one can purchase a Happybuy electric milking machine for cows and sheep. It is a beautiful royal blue and has a 1,440 RPM piston.)

Once I've chilled the animal milks and mixed the milks that have arrived en poudre, it is finally time to taste. There is no formal model for this—does one need a spittoon? Does one rinse glasses between rounds? And how to cleanse one's palate? I settle on a new glass for each sip, and instead of soda crackers, I supply a very large plate of chocolate-chip sea-salt cookies. I corral my husband and an innocent couple who are spending the weekend in our guesthouse.

Everyone perches on stools and regards the first sample: store-bought soy. We've decided to rate each as one would wine, by appearance, aroma, and taste. I've added a column for nutritional content. From our notes the soy is "milky, creamy, a little brown, with likable viscosity, not too leggy." It smells "nice, lightly sweet." The taste: "a little sweet, a little vegetal. Like food." The homemade version brings to mind a wonderful healing broth—and I momentarily wonder why we ever milked anything but soy. Almond milks—six different ones—are next. I immediately wish for a spittoon. One, blended with pistachios and hazelnuts, from an Italian company called Mand'Or, includes 23 grams of sugar per serving—more than half a can of Coke. The Blue Diamond brand almond milk (which I bought unthinkingly for my twelve dairy-free months of nursing) is "grayish," "smelly," and "tastes like salty wastewater." Quinoa milk is muddy, thin, and reminiscent of the liquid left in the pot after cooking quinoa. Tiger nut—not a nut but a little sedge tuber—is very sweet and very beige, with tiny particles floating throughout and a faint savor of rubber. Flax milk ("pearly white," "appropriately thick") is tasteless. This offends my husband, who likes to sew. "Who would do this to flax?" he asks. "Just make linen." The wife of my captive concoupe perceives of a mouthful of hemp milk "a prominent, insistant absence." Macadamia milk is "sour and terrible," but Ripple's Original pea milk "tastes nothing of pea," is "delicious," and has an impressive nutritional profile. Oaty oat milk divides us, but its lead supporter (me) is vocal. Dirty glasses pile in the sink, itself awirl with white, looking, through my milk drunkenness, like an Andy Goldsworthy installation of ephemeral art.

I pour walnut milk from a Queens-based dairy called Elmhurst. "Brown like chocolate milk," I write, smells "amazing," "like maple syrup," and tastes "incredible." It prompts the best notes of the afternoon. Horse milk is roundly rejected as better for making bath soap. But goat's milk, tasting like fresh chèvre, is very good. Donkey's milk, that nectar of popes, has a pleasant barley aroma (once the scent of him blows off), is incredibly sweet, and conjures, for one florid reviewer, "earth milk." (Donkey milk "Nutella," sent to me as a gift by Orunesu, is delightful.) Camel's milk is luminous, as though lit from within, and salty as lassi and immediately vitalizing.

With my husband and guests contorted on or under furniture, seemingly unable to move, I tally results. Five milks rise to the top like Jersey cream: Ripepea milk, Oaty oat milk, donkey's sheep's, and camel's milks. (Oat milk, it should be noted, is not as nutritious as cow's milk. Pea milk is close. Pea protein is not complete but seems to produce as near a nutritional substitute to cow's milk as plants can.) I attempt to persuade my tasters to try reviving lattes made with the finalists, but my husband needs to run a sudden errand. Our houseguests consider cutting their weekend short.

Which is fine, because a better way to appreciate a milk than latte is a traditional bêchamel—milk lightly thickened by a roux—used to sauce a classic gratin. I get back to work. Five little flour and butter roux become five carefully labeled bêchamels. As I sauce five gratins de pâtes aux herbes et chanterelles (baked noodles with mushrooms), the kitchen fills with tantalizing and unfamiliar aromas. My tasters reassure, and we go through them one at a time. The oat-milk gratin is unsettlingly empty. We set it aside. A gratin made with pea milk tastes as though it was made with milk from a cow. The innate sweetness of donkey's milk produces something that tastes conclusively like the Jewish pudding called noodle kugel—fine if that is what you're after. The sheep-milk gratin is divine, but, I recall, sheep's milk has all of the allergens of cow's milk.

Best of all is the camel's-milk gratin, which has a musky, desert-wind quality. It reminds me of a yogurt dish I once ate in a cave in Cappadocia. Next time I plan to serve it with a tangle of fried onions on top, as they would in Turkey. My imagination gets the better of me, and I begin to fantasize about salty camel yogurt, herb-camel ice cream, perhaps dolloped on camel risotto. My reverie is cut short by a reminder of my lactose intolerance.

Better not, I think, sighing. I surrender my serving of camel (with its trace amount of lactose) and content myself with a gratin of noodles and pea.