For almost a year, I made plain yogurt before I tried flavoring it. I resisted flavoring yogurt because it seems that we all have too much incidental sugar consumption in our lives. A little here, a little there, and it all adds up. I worried too that once I started making flavored yogurt, my kids would refuse to eat plain yogurt, and I would be contributing to their already-too-high daily sugar intake.

Yet, curiosity got the best of me, and I just had to expand my yogurt making practice. First I looked at the ingredients in commercial flavored yogurt: fruit puree, sugar and pectin in addition to the regular yogurt ingredients. Fruit, sugar, pectin.... Hmmm. Sure sounds like my homemade jam.

Often when we buy flavored yogurt, the fruit puree is on the bottom. So in keeping with my adventurous approach, I took about 1/4 cup of homemade strawberry-lemon jam and put it on the bottom of a pint jar; then I poured warm, cultured milk on top of it. I put the capped jar in an incubator, and I removed it to cool eight hours later.

Once this little pint had cooled, I mixed the fruit up from the bottom, tasted it, and EUREKA! I made my first pint of strawberry-lemon yogurt. The best part was that it was not too sweet. The jam I make has an equal volume of fruit puree and sugar, and using a 1/4 cup of jam in 1 3/4 cups of cultured milk seemed to impart a nice fruit flavor without overwhelming sweetness.

After this first little victory, I got more interested in other flavoring approaches. I spoke with a nice woman who sells yogurt at the farmers’ market, and she suggested adding sugar or maple
syrup to the milk as it is heating, before it is cultured and incubated. She remarked that this is especially important in order to heat/pasteurize maple syrup before storing it with yogurt in order to destroy any harmful bacteria that might be in the maple syrup. She also remarked that the maple flavored yogurt will be thicker with the syrup cooked in it than it will be if the syrup is added after incubation.

More food for thought. Since I was short on syrup and rich in honey (thanks to my generous cousin Aaron and his wife, Trich), the first batch of yogurt with the sweetener cooked-in was vanilla-honey flavored. I used 1/2 cup of honey for 1/2 gallon of yogurt and the seeds from one vanilla bean. After a fixable mistake-- see Yogurt Blooper #3 -- this yogurt was delicious. Heady, with a rich, woody bouquet. Complex, earthy, deep. The honey and vanilla tones combined with the creamy tang of the yogurt into a glorious symphony for the palate.

Writing this now reminds me to make some more!

Since those early flavoring forays, I have continued to branch out, trying different jam flavors on the bottom of the jars prior to incubation and different sweeteners during pasteurization. Yogurt has the right balance of sweetness for me when I use 1/3 to 1/2 cup of jam per quart and 1/4 cup of sweetener with vanilla or other flavor per quart. My favorite jam sweetener so far is the blackberry-peach jam I made this past summer. As far as the cooked-in flavors go, they are all wonderful, and I do notice that the texture of the yogurt changes slightly. It seems to be less thick than the plain or jam flavored yogurt, and perhaps this texture change is a result of the sugars caramelizing.

Remember to adjust the volume of your milk to accommodate the flavoring ingredients. If you are using 1/2 cup of jam, reduce the amount of milk you are heating by about 1/2 cup. If you are using 1/4 cup of maple syrup, reduce the milk by about 1/4 cup. When you make these adjustments, you don't end up with extra cultured milk that has no pre-heated jar to call home.

I will continue to experiment with yogurt flavoring. Having made a successful coffee flavored batch, I am hoping to make a chocolate quart or a mocha flavored jar. On the fruit front, I may try banana or apple flavoring. I hope you will experiment with different sweeteners and fruit preparations. Please send me any ideas or suggestions that arise out of your yogurt flavoring adventure.