

A fridge too far: why butter must come in from the cold

United States

Will Pavia New York

It is a debate that divides Americans as evenly as any of the great political issues of the day. Should they leave their butter on the counter, or must they keep it in the fridge?

A woman in California has launched a campaign on the issue. Joelle Mertz, 49, is a mother of three from the suburbs of Los Angeles and she has never sought public office, but she is trying to convince Americans, and the government, that butter need not be chilled.

In the service of this cause she has

commissioned laboratory tests confirming the safety of room-temperature salted and unsalted butter, as well as a series of surveys. The surveys showed that 46 per cent of Americans believed in keeping it in the fridge, she said.

Respondents were split roughly in half, “whether I was surveying 30 people, 100 people or 500 people,” she said. The divide roughly aligned with other fault lines in society. “A lot of people who grew up in cities tend to keep their butter in the fridge,” she said. It also appeared to divide people from the coasts from those in the heartland states. “In the Midwest they are leaving

it out and they assume everyone else is doing that.”

One lab study she commissioned involving four brands of butter showed no signs of spoiling after three weeks at room temperature, she said.

Mertz has approached the issue with the zeal of the convert. Growing up, her parents kept butter in the fridge. Then one night, 14 years ago, she left it out. “In the morning, I’m thinking it’s like milk that’s going to spoil,” she said. “I smelt it. I said: ‘I think it’s OK.’” She noticed how easy it was to spread.

Later that day she was at the house of a friend from Oklahoma. “I said: ‘Ash-

ley, you have got your butter sitting out, you need to put it away.’ She looks at me like I’m crazy.” Her friend told her she then left the butter out until the stick was finished.

For Mertz this was a revelation. She went on to write a children’s book, *Change Your Life for the Butter*, and launched a company that makes a butter dish. She is also petitioning the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which says “butter and margarine are safe at room temperature” but can turn rancid after a few days “so it’s best to leave out whatever you can use within a day or two”. Mertz said this guidance

was wrong, adding: “It can stay out for three weeks.” It will take six months for a response from the FDA, she was told.

The broader response has often been amazement, she said. “I keep hearing from people saying: ‘I had no idea!’”

After *The Wall Street Journal* reported on her campaign, one reader said the issue had divided his household. “My wife and I almost had to go to counselling,” he wrote. “She believed (rightly) that you should keep it on the counter.” But he had been raised in New York, and had “insisted it must be kept cold as that is what I have been told/brainwashed by the government”.



Kanchha Sherpa fears that too much tourism at Everest is angering the gods. Kanchha, circled sitting, was 20 at the time of the 1953 expedition. Edmund Hillary is circled standing



We conquered Everest, now we must all try to save it

Natalie Berry

Almost 70 years ago Kanchha Sherpa, then aged 20, stood beneath the greatest wall of snow and ice in the world and knew that at the top of it, for the first time, there were humans. He knew, too, that he had helped to put them there.

Today the last surviving member of Hillary and Tenzing’s 1953 Everest expedition still lives below the mountain. When he looks up at the roof of the world, it is still magnificent, still imposing. But that wall of snow and ice is less than it was.

“The snow-capped mountains are not as snowy and I fear their essence and beauty are slowly diminishing,” he says, speaking from Namche Bazaar, the last village before Everest. That is why he draws some comfort from the knowledge that 70 years after he helped to ferry equipment on to the perilous Khumbu Glacier, his grandson is conducting a more modern mountain challenge: trying to understand why and how glaciers are shrinking.

Tenzing Chogyal, 30, was also born in Namche Bazaar in the swirling mists of Everest’s foothills, two miles above sea level, three miles below its summit. Here, he grew up learning about the cultural ties between Sherpas and

mountains, snow and ice. Then, when he went to study environmental science in Kathmandu, the Nepalese capital, the stories he learnt from Kanchha as a child were bolstered with facts and figures. “I started connecting the dots, seeing what was happening in my region. My grandpa talked about the future a lot and I saw an opportunity to work in my home region and give back to the community.”

He focused his studies on glaciology. Glaciers, for those who know them, can take on almost living qualities, none more so than Khumbu, the ever-shifting, creaking icefall that tumbles down to base camp and marks the gateway to the Everest ascent. In 1953 it was here that Sherpas opened the route to the top, attaching ropes and ladders that became bent and snapped as the ice flowed. Today mountaineers still speak of the glacier as a living, sometimes malevolent, force. It is still a significant obstacle. This month three Sherpas died in an avalanche while fixing ropes.

Tenzing laments

Kanchha Sherpa and his grandson Tenzing Chogyal



that the Sherpa name, in an age of mass tourism, is viewed as a “job description”. He believes that “we need to look through another lens at the dark side of mountaineering. It’s like going to a battlefield.”

In 2018 he joined those Sherpas in battle at Khumbu, but as part of a British-led research trip. Investigating its base, which at 17,400ft is comfortably higher than Mont Blanc, the team found the internal temperature to be 2C warmer than the mean annual air temperature, despite below-zero air temperatures above. The glacier is warming from the inside and, Tenzing says, this can go on for only so long. “Once the ice reaches the tipping point of 0C, you have drastic melting.”

The following year, he was part of a National Geographic project to put the world’s highest weather stations on Everest. Data showed the Khumbu Glacier was thinning. “That was alarming

because we don’t expect to lose a lot of mass at such high altitude,” he says.

This is merely one glacier. Of 50,000 throughout the Himalaya region, about 20 have been studied, but researchers warn that at least a third of the glaciers in the vast mountain range will disappear by 2100, even if warming is limited to the 1.5C “tipping point”.

Much of the melting is because of a phenomenon called elevation-dependent warming. “The higher up you go, the rate of warming starts to increase,” Tenzing says.

The effects of this, in the world’s highest mountains, will spread far beyond those who live here. In the lands below, about two billion people depend on these “water towers of the world”, which act as a buffer between the rains and the dry seasons that follows them.

Tenzing describes the glacier melt crisis as twofold: “You’ll have too much water when you don’t need it and too little water when you need it. That’s where the glaciers usually play a balancing role. In the drier seasons, when you don’t have enough rainfall, most of the rivers are fed by glacier melt.”

Kanchha is the oldest resident of Namche and will be at the centre of celebrations this weekend for the 70th

anniversary of the ascent. A lifetime ago he crunched up virgin glaciers, pioneering a path to a place where humans had never gone before. He did not merely pioneer a mountain climb, he also pioneered an industry: today many Sherpas work in tourism. The wealth, change and people that have come since have left a bittersweet legacy.

After becoming a porter through economic necessity, Kanchha has been able to launch the Kanchha Sherpa Foundation to sponsor Sherpa children’s education and to increase their employment options beyond the mountains. Tenzing is one of those who has had opportunities that, to him, would have been unimaginable.

“It fills me with a deep sense of pride that my grandson has been able to study and become a scientist, something which was near-impossible for Sherpa people of my generation,” he says.

Equally, he is conscious of pollution from afar and — amid mass treks to base camp and mass queues on the summit — closer to home, too.

Overtourism on Everest, he believes, is angering the gods. “I feel that people have forgotten the essence of the mountain deities,” he says. “Their waste is polluting the sanctity of these sacred landforms.”