

April is National Grilled Cheese Month & Not Your Ordinary Ham & Swiss Grilled Cheese Sandwiches

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Summer has salad days, the dark days of December have cookies and comfort food and April has Grilled Cheese. At least in New Hampshire, a celebration of our favorite comfort sandwich is probably a good thing. While other parts of the country are basking in sunshine and watching the daffodils bob, New England has been enjoying a typical spring. And by typical I mean that delightful combination of brilliant sun and temperatures in the seventies one day and snow, ice and gale force winds the next. With weather like that, we need a little comfort.

More than a sandwich, grilled cheese is an iconic symbol of childhood and the home for lunch bunch. That's what my mother called us. Long after most schools across the country set up cafeterias and kitchens, the elementary schools in my childhood suburb sent us home at midday.

It was a nice break for kids and good exercise. We had at least an hour to get home, have lunch and get back again. Since we walked the half mile to school and back again, two round trips kept us pretty fit. That said, it kept our mothers on a very short tether. Within a few short hours of kissing us goodbye, we were back for a sandwich. It wasn't long after that second kiss that we were home for the day. Mom heaved a giant sigh of relief and did a splendid happy dance when elementary school lunches finally started. My brother was in the third or fourth grade. John was the youngest of three and she'd been rushing home to fix lunch for one kid or another for more than ten years.

Our absolute favorite lunch was a grilled cheese sandwich. We didn't have them often, so they were all the more coveted and delicious. Although she loved bringing her family together for a meal, Mom was not an enthusiastic cook. Her grilled cheese sandwiches were no frill and devoid of gourmet touches. She dabbed a little butter on some Wonder Bread and added a square of something that only vaguely resembled cheese and fried them up. Mom used those plastic-wrapped squares that came in orange or white. Those little squares melted beautifully and had little if any taste.

In honor of Grilled Cheese Month, it's time to get out the griddle. You can go with the classic, Wonder Bread and Kraft Singles, if you insist. Not me. Now that I'm all grown up or at least a lot older, I steer clear of foods with labels like Cheese Product. Be it cheddar or brie, gruyere, mozzarella, fontina, Havarti or goat cheese, nothing beats real, honest-to-goodness, natural cheese. Don't be shy, mix and match a few cheeses. And forget the Wonder Bread; wonderful cheeses deserve a beautiful, artisanal bread. From a lovely baguette to a hearty sourdough, there are lots to choose from for your perfect sandwich. To make it even more delectable, throw in a few grown-up embellishments. Already delicious, it will become irresistible when you make one or two or three spectacular additions. Think bacon, caramelized onions, fig jam, mushrooms, olives, prosciutto, spinach, tapenade or, well let's face it, the list of possibilities is all but endless.

Oh, and while grilled cheese may be the epitome of the perfect lunch, those gooey-on-the-inside, crunchy-on-the-outside sandwiches will make a fabulous addition to your next cocktail party. Nostalgia will meet scrumptious when you pass around wedges of your favorite grilled cheese sandwich. Or mix it up with a spectacular variety of minis made with different combinations on sliced baguette. Yummmm!

Happy Grilled Cheese Month and bon appétit!



Not Your Ordinary Ham & Swiss Grilled Cheese Sandwiches

Embellish real Swiss Gruyère and Emmental cheeses with jambon cru and pickled onions for one of the best grilled cheese sandwiches you will ever eat. Enjoy!

Serves 2

About 2 ounces Gruyère cheese, grated
About 2 ounces Emmental cheese, grated
1-2 tablespoons dry white wine
Butter, at room temperature
4 slices country bread
Dijon mustard
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
4 thin slices (about 2 ounces) jambon cru* or prosciutto
Garnish: pickled red onions (recipe follows)

Put the cheeses and wine in a bowl and toss to combine.



Generously butter one side of each bread slice. Smear the other side with mustard and place the bread on a large griddle or in a skillet. Evenly distribute the cheese across all four slices of bread and season with salt and pepper. Cook over medium-low heat until the cheese has melted and the bread is nicely browned, about 8 minutes. Remove from the heat.

Top half of the bread and cheese slices with jambon cru and sprinkle the other half with pickled red onions. Carefully flip one half of each sandwich onto the other, let sit for 2 minutes, cut into wedges and serve.

But what if you want to make grilled cheese for a crowd?

Multiple the ingredients to accommodate the number of sandwiches you want to make. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper or foil and set wire racks in the pans.

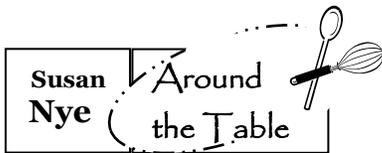
Generously butter one side of each bread slice. Heat a griddle or large skillet over medium heat. Working in batches if necessary, cook the buttered side on the griddle until the bread is a pale golden brown.

Transfer the bread, toasted side down, onto the wire racks. (Can do up to 1 hour ahead.)

Put the cheeses and wine in a bowl and toss to combine. Smear the untoasted side of the bread with mustard, sprinkle with the cheeses and season with salt and pepper.

Bake until the cheese has melted, about 8 minutes. Remove from the oven, top half of the bread and cheese slices with jambon cru and sprinkle the other half with pickled red onions. Carefully flip one half of each sandwich onto the other, let sit for 2 minutes, cut into wedges and serve.

* *Similar to prosciutto, jambon cru is a dry cured raw ham and popular in Switzerland and France.*



*Another recipe from Susan Nye:
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Pickled Red Onions

1 cup hot water
1/4 cup apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon sugar
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1/8 teaspoon dried crushed red pepper
1 red onion, thinly sliced
1 bay leaf

Combine the hot water, vinegar, sugar, salt and red pepper in glass bowl. Stir until sugar and salt dissolve.

Put the red onion and bay leaf in a clean glass jar. Add the vinegar mixture, cover and shake to combine. If the pickling liquid does not cover the onions completely, add more water and vinegar and give it another shake. Cover and chill overnight.