

A GOOD APPETITE

Taking Back a Childhood Favorite



Photographs by Andrew Scrivani for The New York Times

MOTHER YOURSELF Fried salami and a cheese with bite fill a toasted bagel, left, while rich Comté cheese meets whole-grain bread, above right, embellished with mustard.

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OF all the reasons to visit my friends with small children, grilled cheese sandwiches may be the best.

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Sure, I treasure the toddler rituals of dumping everything out of Auntie Melissa's purse, watching out the window for passing trucks ("Look! Elliot! Garbage truck!"), and playing dress up and hide-and-go-seek. But just as much, I love lunchtime, when almost every mother I know asks, "Who wants grilled cheese?" The loudest voice in the yes chorus is unfailingly mine.

Most childless grown-ups I know don't bother making grilled cheese at home. They tend not to have the requisite ingredients (American singles, white bread) in the fridge. And isn't grilled cheese, along with tuna melts, turkey clubs and breakfast specials, why they invented diners?

But after a fun-filled but grilled-cheese-less visit to a friend's house, during which her exceptional twin 2 1/2-year-olds happily consumed garlic-sautéed broccoli, I realized I felt deprived — even after my big-girl's bowl of ice cream with rainbow sprinkles.

It occurred to me that I don't necessarily have to procreate or make play dates as an excuse to eat grilled cheese. Why not just make it at home for myself? Since the only

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finicky palate to appease is my own, I wouldn't be tied to yellow cheese and white bread. And really, wouldn't grilled cheese be just as good or even better when made with slightly more sophisticated, grown-up ingredients, like stinky cheese and grainy bread?

So I started experimenting, keeping the basic technique of frying the sandwich in copious quantities of butter so that the exterior surface of the bread gets crisp and lacy and brittle, while inside the cheese melts into lava, gluing the two slices.

I dug out the very best cheese I had, a nutty and intense aged raw milk Comté from the Essex Street Cheese Company. It was certainly flavorful enough to use on its own between slices of whole-wheat bread. But since I was aiming for something super-grown-up, I decided to add pungent condiments. Before frying, I painted the bread with a light smear of a mustard-cornichon dressing. It was enough to cut the richness of the butter, but not obscure the earthy nuances of the cheese.

The result — crunchy, buttery, tangy and tantalizingly complex — immediately made up for that broccoli-laden lunch.

When the grilled cheese craving struck a week later, I was passing by my local bagel shop. I thought of a bagel and cream cheese and wondered if I could fry it like grilled cheese. But no, cream cheese doesn't have the gooeyness factor of aged cheese, and would simply ooze out in the pan. Bagels and cream cheese made me think about lox, and lox brought to mind Barney Greengrass, a store on Amsterdam Avenue that has the most amazing horseradish Cheddar spread. How would that be on a toasted bagel?

The bagel shop didn't have the spread, but it did have actual horseradish Cheddar. So I bought some with my poppy seed bagel.

Waiting for the bagel to toast I noshed on salami from the fridge, and remembered an old friend who would fry her salami before making it into a sandwich. And why not? I fried a few slices and added them to my cheesy bagel along with rounds of red onion for cool crunch. Spicy, rich and fatty with a meaty edge from the salami, it was definitely as good as regular grilled cheese and nearly as good as bagels and lox.

The next time I thought about grilled cheese, it was again because of a visit with friends and their children. But this time, they were coming over and I was cooking. Was there a grilled cheese variation that would not only please both the children and adults, but also pair well with cocktails?

The answer was quesadillas. These soft tortillas filled with mild cheese, then broiled until crisp and molten-centered, were gobbled up by the younger guests. On the side, I served a bracing papaya and avocado salsa for grown-up dunking. Everyone was delighted.

And now there's a grilled cheese sandwich that gives children a reason to want to visit me.

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