

Grilled Cheese Recipes From Chef Chris Santos

By Chris Santos

Chef, The Stanton Social



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When I was a kid, [grilled cheese](#) was one of the first things I ever "taught" myself to make. But unlike the other neighborhood kids, it wasn't enough to stomp together good old processed American cheese slices with white Wonder Bread and heaps of butter. I mean, that was a delicious introduction, but soon after that discovery I wanted something more.

[Grilled](#) cheese became complex sandwiches stuffed with fried bologna, crispy [bacon](#) (or even bacon bits) rare roast beef, ranch salad dressing, or even, brace yourselves, Spam. Whatever we seemed to have in the fridge worked. It didn't matter. It was like magic -- everything made a grilled cheese even better.

Now, years later, my love of comforting grilled cheese sandwiches hasn't changed. Because I am a chef and work late nights, a grilled cheese is easy to throw on the stove at the end of a shift. It satisfies all 3 a.m. cravings while bringing me to this nostalgic place. It's also hands down the best cure for a hangover and helps soak up late night beverages after a night out on the town.

My trademark version of grilled cheese at [The Stanton Social](#), where I'm the executive chef, includes fried green tomatoes, jalapeño bacon and a gazpacho aioli for a smoky richness and southern twist. Every bite of my grilled cheese sandwich makes me feel like a 13 year old indulging in pure goodness once again. Whether you use truffle oil and tart green apples, avocado and tomato or sliced chorizo and roasted garlic puree, add what you like and don't be scared to experiment.

Next time you're hungry for something melty and crunchy, which for most people is just about any time, try out one of these variations on the classic grilled cheese sandwich.

Mini grilled cheddar sandwiches with jalapeno cured bacon and fried tomatillos

To start, you'll need some two-year aged cheddar, (I like Jasper Hill Farms cheddar, from Vermont) and a loaf of thinly sliced brioche, or any other hearty bread of your choice. You'll be making the other elements of the sandwich. Don't worry -- it's as easy as using a blender.

Jalapeno bacon

Ingredients:

- 2 tbsps chile powder
- 2 lbs sliced smoked bacon
- 1 jalapeno pepper, seeds removed, minced as small as possible

Directions:

Lay bacon in single layers and sprinkle lightly with chile powder. Turn bacon over and sprinkle the other side lightly. Scatter minced jalapenos on top, and cover this with another layer of bacon. Sprinkle lightly with spice mix and scatter minced jalapenos on top. Repeat until you have used all the bacon. Let cure for a minimum of 24 hours. To cook, lay bacon in a single layer on a wire rack over a pan. Cook for approximately 15 minutes at 375F, checking to make sure the powder does not burn. Cool. Cut bacon into thirds.

Gazpacho aioli

Ingredients:

- 1 yellow tomato, cored
- 1 red pepper, seeded
- 1 yellow pepper, seeded
- 1 jalapeno, seeded
- 1 chipotle pepper, minced
- 1 cucumber, peeled and seeded
- 1/2 cup tomato juice
- Juice and zest of 2 lemons
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 tsp cilantro, chopped
- 5 egg yolks
- 1 cup [vegetable oil](#)
- 1 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 tsp Dijon mustard
- 1 clove garlic

Instructions:

Mix everything but the two types of oil in food processor or blender. Very slowly pour in oil in a very fine stream so it starts to turn creamy. Pour slowly until all the oil is incorporated. Season with salt.

Fried tomatillos

Instructions:

Take five tomatillos, husk them and slice them thinly. Dip in flour, egg and [bread](#) crumbs and fry until crispy in a pan with 4 tbsps vegetable oil.

Grilled cheese assembly

To assemble the sandwich, stack the ingredients in the following order between slices of bread:

- Aioli
- Cheddar
- Bacon
- Fried tomatillos
- Fresh cilantro leaves
- Cheddar
- Aioli

Grilled cheese variations:

All grilled cheeses start with bread. I prefer thinly sliced brioche for an extra layer of rich buttery flavor. Also, it's super absorbent and can carry a [heavy sandwich](#). My second favorite bread is sliced sourdough, but really whatever your favorite bread is will work.

Variation 1:

Add thinly sliced green apple in between slices of aged cheddar or creamy brie and drizzle with truffle oil, salt and cracked pepper.

Variation 2:

In between manchego or jalapeno jack cheese slices, layer thinly sliced ripe tomatoes and avocado, seasoned liberally with salt and pepper and a dash of olive oil. A sprinkle of chile powder and some fresh cilantro leaves complete this Latin-inspired midnight snack.

Variation 3:

Add grilled, thinly sliced chorizo and a puree of roasted garlic and mayonnaise to add a smoky richness to a grilled cheese made of idiazabal (a great Spanish cheese) or fontina cheese.