

PIMENTO CHEESE: IT'S A SOUTHERN THING

If you are a Northerner, you know exactly what a “pimiento” is. It’s that sweet red pepper stuffed into a green olive. And you spell it as the Spanish do, with two “i’s.”

If you are a Southerner, you know that “pimiento” is a key ingredient in pimento cheese, a combination of pimiento, cheese and mayonnaise slathered on white bread for sandwiches or served as a dip. You spell “pimiento,” inexplicably, with one “i.” You pronounce it “puh-mennuh,” as in “puhmennuh-cheese,” aka “p.c.,” “Southern pate” and “Carolina caviar.”

“Pimento cheese. It’s a Southern thing,” announced a commentary by producer Wright Bryan broadcast on National Public Radio. Reynolds Price, a novelist and native of Macon, N.C., called this spread “the peanut butter of my childhood.”

It’s an acquired taste. When I first tested a recipe for Mississippi-born chef Jimmy Kennedy, with whom I was writing a cookbook, I thought I had made a mistake. The bland, gloppy bowl of stuff I had mixed up according to his recipe tasted, well, bland and gloppy. “You nailed it!” he said encouragingly. I sampled it again. And again. Fairly soon, I learned what Jimmy meant when he called it “addictive.”

As with peanut butter, methods of eating pimento cheese vary. Jimmy spreads it “regular” (not too thick) on white bread, while his brother piles it on about 2 inches thick. Another friend likes it on sourdough French bread with tomatoes and sliced red onions, a combination I endorse.

Reynolds Price waxes poetic about pimento cheese on “rough brown bread.” In Atlanta, Wright Bryan wrote, it is served on top of hot dogs and burgers. Many people eat pimento cheese with Ritz crackers, saltines or raw vegetables for dipping; as the filling for a grilled cheese sandwich; or as the topping on a baked potato (as a Northerner might enjoy sour cream).

There are probably even more recipes than there are ways to eat it. Even the main ingredients are subject to debate: The cheese might be cheddar (sharp or extra-sharp), Colby, Monterey Jack or a



Pimento cheese, the ultimate Southern comfort food, gets a kick from a chipotle pepper. Credit: Photo by Lisa Fain for “The Homesick Texan Cookbook” by Lisa Fain, Hyperion, 2011.

combination that might include cream cheese. There are those who advocate straight mayonnaise (Hellmann’s or Duke’s) and those who champion “salad dressing” (i.e., Miracle Whip). Then there are the non-purists who add a variety of other ingredients, such as chile peppers, pickles or relish, onion, pecans, garlic, white pepper, cayenne, Worcestershire and hot sauce.

Lisa Fain, a seventh-generation Texan, blogger and author of “The Homesick Texan Cookbook” (Hyperion, 2011), has her own take on the dish: Chipotle Pimento Cheese, which includes a canned chipotle chile (smoked jalapeno pepper), lime juice and cilantro. The recipe is printed here, along with Jimmy Kennedy’s more traditional version. Whichever one you make, accompany it with iced tea.

If your guests are Southerners, they will love you for it. If they are Northerners, they may seem quizzical at first. But don’t be surprised if they fall hard. “Puhmennuhcheese” might be an acquired taste, but it’s easy to acquire.

CHIPOTLE PIMENTO CHEESE

- 1 cup freshly grated cheddar cheese
- 1 cup freshly grated Monterey Jack cheese
- 1 teaspoon grated yellow onion
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1/4 cup jarred sweet pimentos, drained and diced

- 1 canned chipotle chile in adobo, diced (sold in most supermarkets)
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon lime juice
- Salt and black pepper, to taste

In a large bowl, mix together the cheeses, onion, garlic, mayonnaise, pimentos, chipotle chile, cilantro, cumin and lime juice. Taste and add salt and black pepper as needed.

Chill 1 hour before serving. Serve with tortilla chips, crackers or celery sticks. Also makes a fine filling for a whole, hollowed-out jalapeno. Will last a week in the refrigerator.

Yield: 2 cups

(Recipe from “The Homesick Texan Cookbook” by Lisa Fain, Hyperion, 2011)

JIMMY KENNEDY’S PIMENTO CHEESE

- 4 cups grated cheddar cheese
 - 1 cup mayonnaise
 - 1 (4-ounce) jar pimentos, drained and chopped
 - 1/4 teaspoon sugar
 - 1/4 teaspoon salt
 - 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
- Mix all the ingredients in a large bowl until well blended.

Yield: about 4 cups, enough for at least 8 sandwiches (Recipe from “River Run Cookbook” by Jimmy Kennedy, Maya Kennedy and Marialisa Calta, HarperCollins, 2001.)