



Pimento Cheese, Please

Classic Southern spread takes some unexpected twists

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT



Pimento cheese, the spread synonymous with the South, has roots north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Yes, you read that right.

The “pâté of the South” actually got its start in New York after the Civil War, when farmers began manufacturing a soft, ripened cheese (today’s cream cheese). Simultaneously, Spain began exporting canned sweet red peppers, “pimientos,” to the U.S. The second “i” was dropped, and the ingredients were popular from coast to coast.

By 1908, *Good Housekeeping* published

a recipe consisting of cream cheese, mustard, chives and minced pimentos. In response, Georgia farmers began growing more red peppers, ultimately shipping 10 million cans annually throughout the country.

After World War II, the rise of a “home economics” social movement spurred cookbook writers and home chefs to swap cream cheese for shredded cheddar, add spices and use mayonnaise as a binder to make modern-day pimento cheese.

For generations, closely guarded recipes have been handed down through families and collected for church and

garden club cookbooks. Some are purist classics; others are more adventurous, with embellishments such as pickled okra, watermelon rind and even bourbon, to goose the basic recipe.

“Up until 20 years ago, pimento cheese was the base of a sandwich your mother packed and you took to school,” says John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance in Oxford, Miss. “Or it was in the crock your grandma kept in the fridge and you ate with a sleeve of saltines. It was everyday, frugal, working-class food.”

Not anymore.

Pimento cheese is served at country clubs and tailgates, church potlucks and weddings, family reunions and black-tie events, and, most famously, in sandwiches at the Masters Tournament in Georgia.

But there is an agreed-upon fatal sin.

“(Too much) mayo kills pimento cheese,” says Edge. “It should barely bind the ingredients, not smother them. It needs the right balance of creaminess and stiffness.”

A SOUTHERN STAPLE GETS CREATIVE

Artisans have put their stamp on the standard recipe.

“There’s no ‘right way’ to make pimento cheese,” Edge explains. “Just as hummus was mainstreamed with different varieties like jalapeño, pimento cheese variations have gained traction in America.”

Pimento cheese is perfectly portable and available in grocery stores and specialty markets. These are a few favorites:



BIRDIE'S

South Hill, Va.

Robin “Birdie” Allen took her recipe to parties and learned that friends were adding their own ingredients. The Garlic Parmesan is a nod to Italians from the Northeast; Olive delivers a briny tang, which pairs well with Champagne; and Cream Cheese and Black Pepper shines when slathered on pita chips. “People taste ours and then talk about how their aunt or mother made it. We get to share memories.” Birdie’s is available at The Cheese Shop in Williamsburg, Va., Hardywood Park Craft Brewery in Richmond, Va., and Rosemont of Virginia Winery in La Crosse, Va. shop.birdiespc.com



QUEEN CHARLOTTE'S
PIMENTO CHEESE ROYALE

Charlotte, N.C.

John Morgan and his wife, Myers McKenzie, founded the company five years ago using *Jeopardy!* winnings. In addition to the original, each of the three other available flavors has a pun name, like Black and Bleu Blood, which marries the distinct taste of blue cheese with white cheddar’s sharpness; Her Royal Hotness, the original with jalapeño and hot sauce; and pork-laced Baconham Palace. Queen Charlotte’s products are sold in select stores across the region and shipping is also available. qccheese.com



RED CLAY GOURMET

Winston Salem, N.C.

Michele and Lance Sawyer initially peddled cheese tubs to beach- and lake-bound customers. By 2018, the couple sold 5,000 pounds a week with the goal of “pimento cheese world domination.” Every version is preservative-free and made with natural ingredients. The hickory smoked cheddar flavor has a quality reminiscent of bacon, but most distinctive is the subtle heat of the organic-certified Sriracha. There are also Flame-Roasted Jalapeño, Classic Sharp Cheddar and Hickory Smoked Cheddar flavors. Find it locally at Earth Fare, Food Lion and Kroger. redclaygourmet.com

FRED + ELLIOTT PHOTOGRAPHY; RED CLAY GOURMET

CATT LEVESQUE PHOTOGRAPHY; RED CLAY GOURMET; QUEEN CHARLOTTE'S PIMENTO CHEESE ROYALE; ANDREE'S

PIMENTO CHEESE ON THE MENU

Need your fix, but you'd rather dine out? Check out these regional restaurants' offerings.



Pimento Cheeseburger Pizza at Terra; West Columbia, S.C. The wood-fired pizza topped with pimento cheese and ground rib-eye is savory genius. [► terrasc.com](http://terrasc.com)



Pimento Cheese Crostini at Seed Kitchen & Bar; Marietta, Ga. The saltiness of Benton's country ham, the tartness of apple and peppery arugula complement the Worcestershire and Tabasco-spiked pimento cheese. [► eatatseed.com](http://eatatseed.com)



Hot Mess at LOLA; Covington, La. The grilled Hot Mess features New Orleans breakfast Chisesi ham, pimento cheese, lettuce, tomato and house pickles sandwiched between white focaccia bread. [► lolacovington.com](http://lolacovington.com)



Sweet Potato Biscuit at Greenhouse on Porter; Ocean Springs, Miss. The sharpness of house-made pimento cheese pairs nicely with the biscuit's sweetness. [► biscuitsprings.com](http://biscuitsprings.com)



Rice, Rice, Baby at The Mockingbird; Nashville, Tenn. Arancini (small fried rice balls) are stuffed with pimento cheese and served with pickled pepper, grilled scallions and chamoy, a Mexican sauce made from pickled fruit. [► mockingbirdnashville.com](http://mockingbirdnashville.com)