

Pimento Cheeseburgers

Many Americans are vaguely aware of pimento cheese as the orange stuff Southerners smear on crackers or celery sticks and wash down with sweet tea. The neon spread—made with orange cheddar, chopped pimentos, mayonnaise, and, depending on whom you ask, onion, Worcestershire, olives, or hot sauce—tastes as bright as it looks. It is so beloved as a burger topping in and around Columbia, S.C., that Southern food authority John T. Edge calls pimento cheeseburgers the city's "national food." I called the Rockaway Athletic Club restaurant to ask about their famous version. Owner David Nelson disclosed that the cheese recipe comes from "my mama," but he had a good long laugh when I asked what was in it. I might as well have asked the Coca-Cola Co. for its secret formula.

BY MARÍA DEL MAR SACASA



Calls to other Columbia restaurants famous for their burgers (the Palmetto Sandwich Shop, the Mousetrap, and the Kingsman, among them) made two things perfectly clear. First, these aren't ordinary cheeseburgers, where a ho-hum slice of cheese plays second fiddle to the burger. Nope, with "pimento cheese burgers," the emphasis is firmly on the cheese. And second, no matter how polite and charming the reply, no one was going to give me the secret recipe for pimento cheese. I'd have to buy it or concoct my own.

I started at the supermarket, but after tasting a few brands, I can state definitively that this is one convenience product that's not worth the convenience. So I began again, this time in the test kitchen with finely grated extra-sharp cheddar (sharp and mild varieties lacked zip), chopped pimentos (which are jarred sweet red peppers), and mayonnaise. Then I tested the most

common add-ins. My tasters ended up going minimalist. They gave the nod to cayenne pepper and dry mustard, both of which added bite, and they deemed everything else superfluous. (So much for the top-secret recipe!)

Pimento cheese at the ready, I seasoned four burger patties with salt, pepper, and Worcestershire (the sauce suited the burger better than it did the cheese) and tossed them on the grill. When they were almost done, I slathered on the spread. Unfortunately, the selfsame mayonnaise that made the pimento cheese easy to spread also caused it to slide off the sizzling burgers and scorch. Minus the moistening power of the mayonnaise, however, the cheddar hardened into a greasy, orange scab. I remembered that a few pimento cheese recipes had contained cream cheese as well as mayonnaise; I tried the combo in my cheese blend.

This mixture was spreadable, melted gently, and stayed put atop the patty.

These burgers were on their way, but my tasters had become so fond of the pimento cheese, they demanded more. Could I stuff the burgers with cheese? I carefully formed patties around a blob of the soft spread, but during cooking the cheese oozed out of several and burned. I tried chilling the spread before stuffing the burgers to buy myself more time before it melted on the grill. I earned an extra minute or two, at most. All right, then, I'd freeze the cheese. I did so in measures of 2 tablespoons. The cheese stayed solid while I shaped the patties, which allowed me to take more care: After several construction experiments, I found that the cheese stayed put during grilling if I divided the meat for each patty in half and wrapped the cheese twice (see photos 2 and 3 on facing page).

That way, I could be sure the cheese was firmly centered in, and fully contained by, the meat.

The burgers looked great as they rested on a platter, but the first bite triggered a burst of orange lava that burned the chin of more than one taster. The fix was twofold: Omit the mayonnaise from the portion of pimento cheese reserved for inside the burgers, and let the cooked burgers rest for a full five minutes before tucking in. Proud of my pimento cheese formula, not to mention my novel stuffed burger construction technique, I'd keep this recipe a secret, too, if I didn't have to publish it!

PIMENTO CHEESEBURGERS Serves 4

Stick with the 85 percent lean ground beef here, since leaner meat is likely to dry out. Allow the cooked cheeseburgers to rest a full 5 minutes (tenting with foil) before eating them or the hot, cheesy center will spurt out. Ouch!

- 1½ cups (about 6 ounces) extra-sharp cheddar cheese, grated fine
- ⅓ cup drained jarred pimentos, chopped fine
- 2 ounces cream cheese, softened
- ½ teaspoon dry mustard
- ⅙ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- 1½ pounds 85 percent lean ground beef (see note)
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper

1. MAKE PIMENTO CHEESE Mix cheddar cheese, pimentos, cream cheese, mustard, and cayenne in bowl until well combined. Following photo 1, below, drop four 2-tablespoon portions of pimento cheese mixture on plate and cover tightly in plastic wrap. Freeze until firm, at least 2 hours. Combine remaining pimento cheese with mayonnaise, cover with plastic, and refrigerate.

2. SHAPE PATTIES Combine beef, Worcestershire, salt, and pepper in large bowl and gently knead until well combined. Divide meat into 4 equal portions. Following photos 2 and 3, mold each portion of meat around 1 portion of frozen cheese.

3. GRILL BURGERS Grill burgers, covered, over medium fire until well browned and cooked through, 6 to 8 minutes per side.

4. TOP WITH CHEESE Distribute cheese-mayonnaise mixture evenly on top of burgers, cover, and cook until mixture is slightly melted, about 1 minute. Transfer to plate, tent with foil, and let rest 5 minutes. Serve.

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For a recipe for **Stovetop Pimento Cheeseburgers**, visit CooksCountry.com/extra.

RATING WHOLE KOSHER DILL PICKLES

Supermarkets carry a dizzying array of kosher dill pickles, putting us in a pretty pickle every time we stroll the condiments aisle: how to choose the best one? We decided to hold a blind tasting of five national brands to find out.

Before we sat down at the table to taste them, we did some homework. It surprised us to learn that despite the name, kosher dill pickles needn't be produced according to Jewish kosher law. Applied to dill pickles, the designation "kosher" merely indicates the presence of garlic and this style's otherwise sour, salty profile. We also learned that kosher dills come either "processed" or "fresh." Processed are made by brining whole cucumbers in large tanks, where they ferment for weeks or months. During the last stage of fermentation, dill weed is added. The pickles are then rinsed and sealed in shelf-stable jars with vinegar and additional seasonings. Fresh pickles are produced by placing cucumbers directly into jars, filling the jars with seasoned brine, and refrigerating them. Once the pickles have absorbed the seasonings—usually a matter of just a few weeks—they are ready to sell. These pickles, which are sold refrigerated, have a shorter shelf life than processed pickles.

We tasted five national brands, both processed and fresh, looking for the perfect combination of salty, sour, garlicky, and crunchy. With the right snappy crunch and authentic garlicky dill-pickle flavor, the two fresh pickle brands in our lineup trounced the competition. By contrast, the processed pickles were limp and had not a whiff of garlic. When we read the ingredient lists, we saw why: There was neither hide nor hair of it. We did, however, find yellow #5, a synthetic food dye not found in fresh pickles. BY TAZETH SIERRA

RECOMMENDED

BOAR'S HEAD Kosher Dill Whole Pickles
Price: \$3.49 for 26 ounces (13 cents per ounce)
Sodium per 28g serving: 290mg
Type: Fresh



TASTERS' NOTES

These dills were the only pickles in our lineup made with fresh garlic; other brands relied on "dried garlic" or "natural flavors." No wonder tasters praised their "garlicky" flavor and "homemade—not fake" taste. Their "firm, crisp" texture also contributed to their nabbing our preeminent pickle spot. Boar's Head kosher dills were, tasters summed up, "salty, sour, and crunchy"—everything a dill pickle should be.

CLAUSSEN Kosher Dill Wholes
Price: \$3 for 32 ounces (9 cents per ounce)
Sodium per serving: 330mg
Type: Fresh



Almost all of our tasters praised the fresh flavor and crisp texture of these pickles, describing them as "crisp, crunchy—great texture, snappable, vinegary-sweet-sour flavor." A few tasters faulted them as slightly salty.

NOT RECOMMENDED

CAINS Crispy Whole Pickle Kosher Dill
Price: \$4.29 for 32 ounces (13 cents per ounce)
Sodium per serving: 330mg
Type: Processed



TASTERS' NOTES

Most tasters described these pickles as inoffensive or, as one put it, "not horrible tasting." Overall we found them "generic," "not crisp enough," and "lacking in flavor." A few tasters had a harsher verdict. Said one: "Bland, boring, mushy, and dull," like "what you find on a fast food burger."

VLASIC Kosher Dills, whole
Price: \$2.99 for 32 ounces (9 cents per ounce)
Sodium per serving: 210mg
Type: Processed



In sum: "meek" and "sweet," with "no crunch or pucker" and a "terrible chemical taste." Most tasters detected neither dill nor garlic. Another strike against this brand? The "tough skin." Even the most generous assessment damned with faint praise: "tolerable."

MT. OLIVE Kosher Dills
Price: \$4.79 for 46 ounces (10 cents per ounce)
Sodium per serving: 260mg
Type: Processed



Tasters complained that these "didn't taste much like a pickle," registering as "watered-down" and "mushy." The skin was at once rubbery and tough, the interior "broken down." What really put this pickle in last place, however, was the long list of off-flavors tasters detected, including "sour mustard," "finny," "rusty," "sweet ketchup," "sulfurous," "dusty," and "chemical."

STEP BY STEP Build a Better Pimento Cheeseburger

The homemade pimento cheese on top of our burgers was so tasty, we wanted even more—so we decided to stuff the burgers with extra cheese. But there's no point to stuffing the burgers if the cheese dribbles (or gushes) away with your first bite. Our construction technique forms burgers with a tight seal.



1. Drop four 2-tablespoon portions of pimento cheese on a plate and use your palm to lightly flatten. Cover the plate tightly with plastic and freeze until firm, about two hours.



2. Divide each portion of meat in two, and wrap half around one disk of frozen cheese, taking care to completely and snugly enclose the cheese. This forms the first barrier to keep the cheese in place.



3. Mold the remaining half portion of meat around the mini patty and tightly seal the edges. Gently and uniformly flatten each to form 1-inch-thick patties that will cook evenly and contain the hot cheese.

Don't Make This Mistake

Can you shortcut homemade pimento cheeseburgers by buying jarred pimento cheese in the supermarket? No, you can't! The packaged pimento cheese tastes slimy and is too loose for these burgers; it will run right out of the patties and make a mess of your grill. And we're not the only ones who don't like this stuff. Like many other Southerners, food writer Martha Hall Foose feels so strongly on the subject of the ubiquitous spread, she titled her own recipe "Pimento Cheese: Not Store-Bought, Please."



STOREBOUGHT PIMENTO CHEESE
Don't do it.