

THE COMPETENT COOK by Lauren Braun Costello

“Cook with competence for confidence in the kitchen!”

Great Grilled Cheese

Buttered, toasty bread. Oozing, milky cheese. The grilled cheese sandwich is simple yet perfect in every way. Somehow, though, it is possible to mess up this timeless and unfussy dish. Any competent cook should know the secret to making grilled cheese just right every time.

Butter the Bread

One of the most important elements of a quality grilled cheese sandwich is that the bread is evenly buttered and properly toasted. If the rich and satisfying taste of butter does not pervade every bite, something is lost. On the same note, if the bread is not golden brown, or worse yet burned, the balance of flavor will be lost.

The only way to guarantee even flavor and color is to butter the bread instead of the pan. This might seem counterintuitive, but it is in fact the very best way to achieve a uniform taste and color. Moreover, it actually helps to reduce the amount of butter needed to get the job done. If you spread soft butter on the outside (the side that will touch the pan) of each slice of bread, you will apply only as much as is needed, and at that you will do it evenly. Any technique that makes a dish taste more buttery with less butter is worth trying!

Choose Choice Cheese

Most of us probably think of a classic grilled cheese sandwich as two slices of white bread with one slice of American cheese between them. This is certainly a good start. Over the years, I have found that there are other cheeses that work wonderfully well, and others that are not as well suited to this particular style of sandwich.

Munster cheese is a superior cheese to the perfectly square orange variety that comes ever so conveniently individually wrapped in every American grocery store. Not only is it equally mild and cheesy in flavor, it melts magnificently. In fact, Munster cheese is used widely in diners and other lower budget eating establishments for all dishes “parmigiana” in place of the more expensive mozzarella cheese.

Speaking of mozzarella cheese, I am not a fan when it comes to grilled cheese sandwiches. I do adore fresh buffalo mozzarella, but it does not melt to the point of losing its shape as do Munster and American cheese. Sweet and milky, the flavor of fresh mozzarella is so appealing. But unless it is sliced very thin, it never seems to melt enough in a grilled cheese sandwich.

When selecting cheese for a grilled cheese sandwich, consider the way the cheese melts. Any cheese you like is acceptable, of course. But remember that texture is just as important as flavor since the sandwich is warm.

Slow, Low and with a Lid

A grilled cheese sandwich makes a quick and easy meal any time of day. Just like an omelet, however, the process should not be too hurried. Heat a pan (non-stick or not) over medium heat and allow it to get hot before you cook. Once the metal of the pan is hot from the outside through to the cooking surface, place the buttered side of the first slice of bread down. Top with one or two slices of cheese, then top with the second slice of bread, butter side up.

Immediately place a lid on top of the skillet. Do not worry about the sandwich potentially steaming or becoming moist because it simply will not. The bread absolutely will toast given that it is being cooked over direct heat. Covering the pan will capture the indirect heat to facilitate melting the cheese. After about two minutes, flip the sandwich to toast the second slice of bread. If the cheese still needs to melt a bit more, cover the pan with a lid again. If the cheese is melted to your satisfaction, at this point you may finish the cooking process sans lid.

If you enjoy a slice of tomato with your grilled cheese, go for it. I recommend using two slices of cheese in this instance and placing very thin slices of tomato (not with too many wet seeds) between the slices. This will keep the bread from becoming moistened by the tomato, and will allow the cheese to melt better by being closer the toasting bread.