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French Onion (Plus) Grilled Cheese Sandwich

Serves 4

There's no question that one of our favorite go-to winter meals is a grilled cheese sandwich. It's as simple as pairing whatever bread might be around with any cheese found in the refrigerator drawer. But, don't let that ad hoc habit limit you in concocting an even better, more delicious grilled cheese sandwich! This version takes mundane to the gourmet level with nutty-flavored Gruyère cheese and some crunchy and salty additions. It's a sandwich worthy enough for company or sharing during game time eating. The best part? Many of the steps may be accomplished ahead of time making the final assembly a breeze.

Ingredients:

3 large white onions, caramelized
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 tablespoon olive oil
1/2 teaspoon Kosher salt
8 slices bacon, cooked and crispy
4 tablespoons mayonnaise (or softened butter)
2 cloves garlic, crushed
8 oz. Gruyère cheese, coarsely shredded
1 Granny Smith apple, sliced
8 slices artisan sourdough bread

Directions:

1. Do-Ahead Step: Caramelize the onions. Peel and slice the onions, pole-to-pole. In a large, oven-safe soup pot, melt the butter and olive oil. Add the onions and 1/2 teaspoon Kosher salt. Toss to coat the slices. Sauté, stirring often until the onions begin to wilt. In a preheated 375°F oven, place the pot in the oven covering it with a lid; cook for 30 minutes. The onions will become fully wilted. Stir, and continue to cook without a lid for another 45 minutes. Check every 15 minutes, stirring each time. The onions will caramelize turning a lovely golden color. Set aside and allow to cool slightly before assembling the sandwich. Alternatively, remove the onions from the pot and store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to one week. Save any leftovers for another sandwich, or for a great bowl of French onion soup on another day.

2. Do-Ahead Step: Cook the bacon until just crispy by pan-frying, or by baking on a rimmed baking sheet at 375°F for 15-20 minutes. Drain the bacon strips on a paper-toweled plate and set aside until assembly time. The cooked bacon strips may be wrapped and stored in the refrigerator for up to a week.

3. Do-Ahead Step: Mix the mayonnaise with garlic for an impromptu aioli. (Using mayonnaise is a great secret when making grilled cheese sandwiches, and adding a little garlic is a nice bonus!) If you simply can't do mayonnaise for some reason, soften butter and mix in the crushed garlic.

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4. Do-Ahead Step: Gruyère cheese has Swiss origins and is generally found in chunks or blocks. Grate the cheese using a coarse grater. Shredded cheese is easier to add to irregularly shaped bread slices and melts more evenly.

5. When ready to serve, assemble the sandwiches by spreading a thin layer of the mayo-aioli mixture on each bread slice. For neatness, put the slathered sides together and build the layers on top of the stack of two slices. Start with one layer of caramelized onions, then apples, followed by cheese and bacon crumbles. Grill in a panini press or stovetop grill pan until the cheese is nicely melted and the bread grilled to a nice golden color. Cut in half and serve immediately.