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Is pimento cheese a gourmet dish?

It's not just for Southerners anymore.

By KATHLEEN PURVIS

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Poor pimento cheese. The world just couldn't leave it alone.

As long as it stuck around the Carolinas, it stayed humble, true to its working-class roots.

Sure, we might spread it on a hamburger or nuke it for pimento cheese dip. But mostly, we kept it simple, in white bread sandwiches or smeared on crackers.

After all, when you have something that basic — at its heart, it's just shredded cheese and diced pimentos mixed with mayonnaise — it's best to let it be. Save your energy for debating those three basic elements: Coarsely shredded vs. finely grated cheese, pimentos vs. roasted red peppers, Hellmann's vs. Duke's vs. Kraft Miracle Whip.

But now the rest of the world has discovered it. Publications from Bon Appetit to Nation's Restaurant News have declared pimento cheese the hot food trend of 2011. And we know what that means, right?

Words like "artisanal" are getting thrown around. It's getting paired up with fussy things like aioli, panko and Kobe beef. It's turning up in places it was never intended to go, such as sushi and cheesecake.

It's like we sent our child out into the world and she came home in high heels and too much makeup.

Show some respect, people. After all, this is the food we call "the pate of the South."

Despite all the pimento cheese debates, one thing most sources agree on is that it started in the South, with a strong connection to the Carolinas. The latest to make the case is



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culinary history buff Rick McDaniel, who just published a book, "An Irresistible History of Southern Food" (The History Press, \$24.99).

Although he thinks pimento cheese probably dates to 1870 or so, the earliest printed recipe he found was in an Asheville book called "The Queen of Appalachia Cookbook," dating from around 1910.

"I have no doubt (it's Southern)," says McDaniel. "I've never seen a pimento cheese recipe from a purely Northern cookbook."

Although no one has a definitive answer to why people started using shredded cheese as a sort of mayonnaise-based salad, it took off quickly in the hot Southern summers and really became a staple during the Depression, when cheese was a cheap form of protein.

When Durham food writer Emily Wallace was getting her master's degree in folklore from UNC Chapel Hill in 2010, she wrote her 80-page thesis on pimento cheese.

Wallace gave a lot of thought to the role that pimento cheese played as a product for female entrepreneurs in the South in the 1920s, and the way it managed to be a blue-collar lunch and a polite-society staple at the same time.

"A lot of foods, they start high and move down," she says. "But (pimento cheese) really retained its status as a delicacy." For instance, Eugenia Duke, the founder of Duke's Mayonnaise, sold pimento cheese sandwiches in textile mills at the same time she was serving it at a tea room in a nice hotel.

"And I think that happened all over. As it hit the working class, it never left the tea room menus."

Wallace found that it still retains a strong pull in the Carolinas. When she interviewed the vice president of Moody Dunbar, the nation's leading canner of pimentos, she learned that 80 percent of all pimento cheese spreads are sold in 11 Southeastern markets — and the two largest are Raleigh-Durham and Charlotte.

"It's not a novelty here," she says. "It's a thing of every day."



Rick McDaniel of Asheville, author of "An Irresistible History of Southern Food."



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Getting better

Despite our affection for it, we Southerners haven't always treated pimento cheese with respect. While the best pimento cheese is homemade, pimento cheese spreads have been sold in supermarkets since the 1940s.

And that wasn't always a good thing. In 1981, novelist Reynolds Price declared that supermarket versions were made "from congealed insecticides."

Maybe that's one thing that has changed for the better in the Great Pimento Cheese Explosion of 2011. New and improved versions are battling it out in supermarkets.

Still, step carefully when you wade into all those pimento cheese debates. "When you go messing around with the food of people's childhood," says McDaniel, "they can get really territorial really fast."

Since she wrote a thesis on it, Wallace says, people always want to know what she thinks is the definitive version.

When she tells them — her grandmother's, with a little sugar, mustard and vinegar along with mayonnaise — "then you get the 'what you talking about?' response."

Emily Wallace's Pimento Cheese

Wallace adapted this from her grandmother, who was from Albemarle.

- 1 pound sharp cheddar, grated
- 1 (4-ounce) jar diced pimento, drained
- 4 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1/2 teaspoon mustard
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon sugar

Combine all ingredients. Store in the refrigerator.

Rick McDaniel's Pimento Cheese

From "An Irresistible History of Southern Food." McDaniel blogs about cooking and Southern food history at www.hushpuppy.com and chefrick.com

- 16 ounces aged white cheddar



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Suzie Lowe of Augusta's Creations pimento cheese of Charlotte.

- 1 (2-ounce) jar diced pimentos, drained
- 6 tablespoons mayonnaise
- 1/2 teaspoon chili powder
- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/8 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper, or to taste

Grate the cheddar by hand. Add the rest of the ingredients and stir lightly to mix. Refrigerate for 30 minutes before serving. Serve with crackers.



Emily Wallace, Durham

P.C. commands

Acceptable delivery systems: Crackers, bread (preferably white bread), celery, hamburgers. Yes, you may heat it and use it as a dip. Stirring it into grits is allowed on beach or camping trips where efficient use of ingredients may be required.

Acceptable variations: Using roasted red peppers in place of a small jar of drained pimentos. Duke's, Hellmann's or homemade mayonnaise as the base. Spelling it "pimiento," even though it smacks of literary affectation.

Not acceptable: Miracle Whip or any ingredient your grandmother couldn't pronounce, such as aioli. Crunchy additions such as chopped celery, green peppers or minced onion. (Green onions may be used as a garnish as long as you show restraint.)

Never: Use any form of processed cheese or anything labeled "cheese food."

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