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We're in the final countdown. Over at the high school, exams have been taken and graded, gowns have been donned and caps have been thrown in the air. At the middle school, end of year recitals have been recited and the cross-country team has run its last race. Elementary school students have emptied their desks and munched the last cupcake. Soon the final bell will ring and kids will pile out the doors to freedom. At least for a couple of months.

It's tough to be cooped up in a stuffy classroom for eight or nine months of the year, especially when each day starts at the crack of dawn with a long bus ride. I grew up in suburbia with neighborhood elementary schools. While everyone came together for junior high and high school, there were at least a dozen elementary schools. With a possible exception or two, from kindergarten through sixth grade, every kid lived within walking distance of school. And walk we did. Only a downpour would launch our carpool. Of course school was cancelled on snowy days but when the temperature dipped below zero we wore an extra sweater, snow pants and walked anyway. (At least that's how I remember it!)

And we took a break at mid-day and went home for lunch. It was probably a holdover from the days when all moms were stay-at-home and families ate dinner at noon. It must have been a pain, this daily interruption but Mom never complained. She called us the "home for lunch bunch". With a ten year spread from oldest to youngest, it took years for Mom to get an uninterrupted day.

Lunch at home was a nice break in the action. My sister Brenda and I would plop ourselves down at the kitchen table. Mom would ask us about our morning while she bustled around the kitchen. She juggled our baby brother and his bottle while fixing sandwiches or heating up spaghettiOs.

Grilled cheese sandwiches were hands down my favorite lunch. Bright orange cheese and Wonderbread went into a skillet with a little bit of butter. It came out golden brown, crunchy on the outside with warm, gooey cheese inside. I was a purist back then. No extras. No bacon. No tomatoes or onions.

It's been a long time since I had a grilled cheese sandwich, years in fact. Until last Sunday when I didn't want one, I needed one. It had been a long busy week. I'd been up early every morning, late to bed every night and all over the State. Sunday started out grey and drizzly and didn't get much better.

In spite of the dreary weather, I took a walk around the lake in the late afternoon to get some much needed exercise. About a mile from home, I tried to figure out what leftovers were in the refrigerator and how to assemble them into supper. I needed something comfy and cozy. It had to be both delicious and effortless. I thought of pasta but was daunted by the thought of boiling water. (I said I was pooped!) Then that little light bulb went off in my head. Grilled cheese! The perfect solution!

Now I gave up Wonderbread and Kraft singles years ago and had absolutely no intention of revisiting that decision. Instead I assembled the most delicious grilled cheese sandwich in the history of my kitchen, possibly kitchens everywhere. The crispy sourdough bread was oozing with warm, wonderful mozzarella. I added oven roasted tomatoes for a touch of sweetness and spiced it up with a bit pistou and some Greek olives. Just thinking about that lovely little sandwich makes me hungry again. Give it a try and let me know what you think.

Bon appétit!

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The Best Grilled Cheese Sandwich in the History of my Kitchen

I used homemade pistou because it was in my refrigerator, you can use store bought pesto. Roast extra vegetables and serve them with grilled chicken or tossed with pasta on another night. Enjoy!



Grape tomatoes (about 5 per sandwich)
Extra virgin olive oil
Balsamic vinegar
Red onion, chopped (teaspoon or 2 per sandwich)
Red bell pepper, chopped (teaspoon or 2 per sandwich)
Garlic, minced
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
Sourdough bread, sliced - 2 slices per sandwich
Butter
Fresh mozzarella pearls
Spicy Sundried Tomato-Basil Pistou (recipe follows)
Greek oil cured olives, pitted and chopped

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Toss the tomatoes in a 50/50 mix of olive oil and balsamic vinegar and season with salt and pepper. Use a light touch; don't drown the tomatoes in oil and vinegar. Roast for 5-10 minutes while you chop the onion, pepper and garlic. Add the onion, pepper and garlic and continue roasting until the onion is translucent and the tomatoes are soft and a little bit shriveled, 5-10 minutes.

Meanwhile, toss the mozzarella pearls in a little pistou.

Lightly butter one side of each slice of bread. Set the bread in a skillet, top half the slices with mozzarella pearls. (A slice of mozzarella will also work - use what you have in the refrigerator.) Top the remaining slices with the tomatoes, onion and pepper. Cover the skillet and cook on medium low for 8-10 minutes or until the bread is golden brown on the bottom and the cheese is nice and gooey. Sprinkle with chopped olives, put the two sides together and serve.

Spicy Sundried Tomato-Basil Pistou

Traditional pistou is made from herbs, garlic, olive oil and a little salt. I've added a little sweetness and spice with the sundried tomatoes and jalapeño.

Makes about 1 cup

4 halves oil-packed sundried tomatoes
1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
3 cloves garlic
1 teaspoon minced jalapeno pepper or to taste
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
Extra virgin olive oil
About 1 cup fresh basil leaves
About 1 cup fresh parsley leaves

Put the tomatoes, vinegar, garlic, jalapeno, salt, pepper and a little olive oil in the bowl of a small food processor; pulse to chop and combine. Add the herbs and more olive oil as needed. Process everything until you have a thick, creamy sauce.