



ANSON MILLS

Pimento Cheese

Yield

3 cups

Time

45 minutes hands-on time

Cooking Remarks

The practical reason for roasting a pepper is to loosen its skin so you can peel it. The poetic reason for roasting a pepper is to lift it to another dimension, where it becomes silky, smoky, soft, sweet, and magical. We like the second reason best.

There's more than one way to roast a pepper, and each one involves an extreme, but very specific, application of heat. The idea is to scorch the skin enough for it to balloon away from the flesh so that it slips off easily. Take it further and the pepper itself goes under fire and you end up with a charred, flaky mess. That being said, peeling a roasted pepper is basically sort of messy. But don't be tempted to avoid the mess by rinsing the skins away with running water. You'll be rinsing away the poetic reasons for roasting the pepper in the first place—that magically enhanced flavor.

A charcoal grill and hardwood coals produce the most intoxicating flavor in a roasted pepper, but a gas grill works well, too. Throw whole peppers onto a hot grill and let the skins blacken and blister uniformly; turn them occasionally with tongs. Indoor fire presents certain advantages—for instance, you don't need matches or coals. If you happen to have an indoor grill, we envy you. Go ahead and use it. We are also fond of letting peppers sit on an old cooling rack over a gas-stove burner. If you try this method, roast the peppers whole, as you would over an outdoor grill, keeping the flames from licking at the pepper too aggressively.

No matter the roasting method you use, when the peppers are uniformly charred, place them in a plastic bag where they will steam, which helps to loosen the skins. Once they've cooled, rub and peel off the skins.

Trim the tops and bottoms from the roasted and skinned peppers, then slit each one down the side and open as you would a book, so it lays flat on the work surface. Scrape out the seeds and trim away the inner ribs with a sharp paring knife. Slice the planks into thin strips, then cut the strips crosswise into 1/8-inch dice.

We ask that you store the roasted peppers and their juices in a nonreactive bowl. Nonreactive cookware is cookware that doesn't react with acids; these reactions can give foods an unwanted "off" or metallic flavor. The juices from the roasted peppers can react in this way. Aluminum and cast iron are the most common reactive materials used in cookware. Stick with stainless steel, glass, or ceramic and you'll be fine. (Nonstick is also fine as long as the coating is intact.)

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe, you will need a chef's knife, a small nonreactive bowl, a box grater, a large bowl, and a rubber spatula.

Ingredients

3 firm red bell peppers (6 ounces each), roasted, peeled, and cut into 1/8-inch dice (see Cooking Remarks)

4 garlic cloves

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

Fine sea salt

Hot sauce, such as Tabasco

12 ounces cheddar cheese, preferably 6 ounces each of sharp yellow cheddar and aged raw-milk cheddar (if the latter is unavailable, use 12 ounces of sharp yellow cheddar)

1/2 cup (4 ounces) Hellman's or Best Foods mayonnaise, plus additional as needed

Red May Crisps or celery ribs for serving

Directions

1. Add the diced roasted bell peppers and any residual juice to a small nonreactive bowl (you should have 1 very generous cup). Smash the garlic cloves with the flat side of a chef's knife, remove and discard the skins, and add the garlic to the bowl with the peppers. Stir in the vinegar, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and up to 1/2 teaspoon hot sauce. Cover with plastic wrap and let stand for 1 to 2 hours.

2. Meanwhile, grate the cheese on the large holes of a box grater (you should have about 4 cups lightly packed). Turn the cheese into a large bowl and set aside.

3. Remove and discard the garlic cloves from the peppers, which are now pimentos, and, using a rubber spatula, stir the pimentos into the grated cheese until well combined. Add the mayonnaise and fold lightly with the spatula. If the mixture appears too dry, fold in additional mayonnaise, 1 tablespoon at a time. Taste for seasoning.

4. Transfer the pimento cheese to a serving container with a lid, cover tightly, and refrigerate for at least 2 hours. Serve chilled with Red May Crisps or packed into celery ribs. (Covered tightly, pimento cheese keeps refrigerated for up to 1 week.)