

Grilled Cheese and Tomato Soup



We recently held a small surprise birthday dinner party for my husband, Scott. All intentions for a larger surprise gathering evaporated with COVID. But since this is a landmark birthday, we did try to make it a bit special regardless. Here are the grilled cheese and tomato soup ideas we created based on a grown-up theme.



Entertaining at home is limited to very small groups. We are careful to be outside in the fresh air. As much as we want to include all our friends, we are being conscientious until this whole pandemic settles down.

In planning, I need to be more aware of how food is served, social distancing and the weather conditions. Our winters in Phoenix are chilly, especially at night and in the morning.

With the help of my children, we did all the cooking while trying to keep Scott out of the kitchen (that could be a blog post in itself!). It was a bit frenetic to say the least. Before any event I am so swamped I forget to take really good pictures of the setting and food. I need to get better at this!

The Menu

The menu for the dinner is:

- Creamy Tomato Soup
- Artisanal Grilled Cheese Sandwiches
- Winter Salad
- Black Forest Cake from [Tessa Huff's Layered](#) cookbook

- Glossy Fudge Brownies with Walnuts from [Stella Park's Bravetart](#) cookbook

The recipes for the creamy tomato soup and artisanal grilled cheese are from Bon Appetit's October 2012 issue. Guests design their own sandwiches from a table of curated fixings.

The Fixings



To make the sandwiches have adult appeal (but who really doesn't love a crisp, gooey grilled cheese sandwich?) you can vary the ingredients. For this party, the meat fillings for the sandwich include: thinly sliced ham, prosciutto, smoked brisket, and crispy bacon.

Pre-shredding the cheese allows for faster and even melting. Dill havarti, sharp cheddar, pepper jack, gruyere, and smoked gouda are good cheese choices.



Sliced sourdough bread is an easy store purchase, and you can use whole grain or rye. Whole grain mustard, fig and sour cherry jam, are nice spreads to add. Though we did not include these, thinly sliced apples and sauerkraut would work too.



The Soup and Salad

This easy, delicious tomato soup can also be made ahead of time and reheated. If you haven't made my Winter Kale salad, this is a winner. For this particular event, I did not include the wild rice, but made the salad with chopped fresh kale, feta cheese, pomegranates and toasted walnuts. See the recipe [here](#).



The beauty of this meal is that you can prepare most of it ahead of time. On the day of the event, slice and skillet (or broil) the bread, grate the cheese, make the salad. The soup can be prepared up to 2 days earlier. Just before guests

arrive, re-heat the soup and set everything out.

The Preparation

Let your guests decide their fillings, and then finish the sandwich off on the grill or in the oven~hot for consumption. It is fun to take everyone's order and with one person grilling, the sandwiches are ready quickly.



Soup is served in mugs so everything can fit onto one large plate.

Desserts

For dessert, our guests choose from either rich, fudgy brownies or Black Forest cake or both.



Brownies with walnuts from my son's favorite cookbook, [Bravetart](#)



Black Forest Cake from one of my favorite cookbooks, [Layered by Tessa Huff](#)

This warm and comforting meal is very appropriate for a rather chilly evening outside. I was afraid the cake was too small to serve everyone, but thin slices are appropriate for this rich, dense and delicious cake. And I always forget to take off my apron!



Homemade layer cake!

Happy Tuesday, my friends! I guess the New Year has officially begun. How nice to have a weekend after the holiday! We are celebrating our youngest's birthday this week and I will no longer have any teenagers at home. Where does the time go?

Mary

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Creamy Tomato Soup

This recipe can be easily doubled to feed a larger group and makes great leftovers.

- 1/4 cup unsalted butter (1/2 stick)
- 10 sprigs thyme (tied together)
- 1 medium onion (thinly sliced)
- 2 cloves garlic (thinly sliced)
- 1/4 cup tomato paste
- 2 28 oz. cans whole tomato
- 1-2 tsp sugar, divided
- 1/4 cup (or more) heavy cream
- kosher salt, freshly ground pepper

1. Melt butter in a large heavy pot over medium heat. Add thyme, onion, and garlic. Cook until onion is completely soft and translucent. 10-12 minutes. Increase heat to medium-high; add tomato paste. Continue cooking, stirring often, until paste has begun to caramelize in spots, 5-6 minutes.
2. Add tomatoes with juices, 1 tsp. sugar and 8 cups water to pot. Increase heat to high, bring to a simmer. Reduce heat to medium. Simmer until flavors meld and soup reduces to about 2 quarts (8 cups), 45-55 minutes. Remove soup from heat; let cool slightly. Discard thyme sprigs. Working in small batches, purée soup in a blender until smooth. Return to pot.

3. **DO AHEAD:** Soup can be made 2 days ahead. Let cool slightly; cover and chill. Rewarm before continuing.
4. Stir in 1/4 cup cream. Simmer soup until flavors meld, 10-15 minutes longer. Season to taste with salt, pepper, and remaining 1 tsp. sugar. Add more cream if desired.

For a lighter soup, omit the cream; or for a little decadence, add more cream or swirl in a little crème fraîche.

Grilled Cheese Sandwiches

The secret to making grill cheese for a crowd? Turn on the oven (or use the outdoor grill). Encourage guests to customize their sandwiches with the cheeses, breads and fixings you have set out. Then simply pop them on a baking sheet or grill and cook.

- 3/4 cup unsalted butter, room temperature (1 1/2 sticks)
 - 16 1/4" thick slices assorted bread
 - 1 1/2 lb. Assorted cheeses (coarsely grated)
 - Assorted fixings (meat, spreads, etc.)
 - Kosher Salt, freshly ground pepper
1. Arrange racks in upper and lower thirds of oven; preheat to 350 degrees. Set a wire rack inside each of 2 foil-lined rimmed baking sheets. Butter 1 side of each bread slice with about 1/2 TBSP butter.
 2. Heat a medium skillet over medium heat until very hot, at least 2 minutes. Melt 1/2 Tbsp butter in skillet. Add 2 slices of bread, buttered side down, cook, pressing

down often with a spatula to ensure even basting and rotating pan frequently, until bread is evenly golden brown, 3-4 minutes. (Do not rush or increase heat, or your bread will burn before it can evenly toast).

3. Transfer bread slices, toasted side down to prepared wire racks (this will keep bread crunchy). Repeat with remaining bread and butter, wiping out skillet between batches. (If all the bread doesn't fit on the racks, you may need to bake sandwiches in two batches). **DO AHEAD:** Bread can be toasted 1 hour ahead; let stand at room temperature.
4. Garnish untoasted side of each slice of bread with fixings, then top each slice with a small handful of cheese (about 1 1/2 oz.), scattering evenly. Season with salt and pepper (do not skip this steps; it really elevates the flavors in the sandwich).
5. Bake bread slices, rotation baking sheets halfway through, until cheese is thoroughly melted, 10-12 minutes (begin checking after 8 minutes, some cheese melt faster than others). Working in batches, firmly press 2 cheese-topped sides of sandwiches together. Let rest for 1-2 minutes. Slice in half or into quarters. Serve hot or warm.

We grilled the sandwiches on an outdoor grill, not in the oven. Either works fine. Fixings can be: sliced ham, prosciutto, bacon, smoked brisket. Cheeses suggestions: cheddar, Swiss, Havarti, pepper Jack, gouda. Spreads: fig jam, sour cherry jam, chutney, cranberry sauce, whole grain mustard, Grey Poupon. Other: thinly sliced apples, sauerkraut. Get creative!