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How to cook perfect cheese straws

Are cheese straws your favourite party snack – or do you prefer something a little less practical?



Felicity's perfect cheese straws. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

A few years ago, Waitrose magazine conducted a Serious Survey of chefs and food critics, aimed at establishing once and for all, Britain's favourite canape – you may well mock, but these are important issues – and the results, according to contemporary "news" reports, came as a bit of a shock. The professional snack scoffers shunned the miniature fish suppers and burgers so popular at the time, plumping instead for the deliciously retro cheese straw: "solid enough to provide a good foil to alcohol and its only drawback is the threat of crumbs falling on the carpet".

While I can but concur with such nibble knowhow, I can't help thinking they've missed the point. Yes, cheese straws are a practical choice (easy to eat with one hand, simple to prepare in advance, popular with vegetarians and small children) but most importantly, they tick all the boxes when it comes to the kind of thing people want to eat after a glass or nine of wine. Crunchy, intensely savoury, and ever-so slightly greasy, they're the grown-up equivalent of a great big bowl of cheesy Wotsits, without the weird orange dust that can play havoc with a girl's party frock. Bought versions, bland and brittle, all too often disappoint, however – like sausage rolls, these are much, much better made at home, like the domestic Christmas fairy.

Pastry



Rose Prince recipe cheese straws. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

There are two schools of cheese straw – the fancy continental sort, what the Italians call *salatini al formaggio*, made with twists of puff pastry, lightly sprinkled with cheese; and the crumbly, more offensively cheesy variety, cut from a shorter pastry, and of an older vintage (in this country at least – the first recorded recipe, in Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* is very similar to Rose Prince's shortcrust version. As a cheese fiend, I shuffle towards the latter, but have resigned myself to the flakier charms of puff, it being the standard shop-bought offering.

Michel Roux's recipe, from his book *Pastry*, is beautifully simple – the rolled puff is brushed with beaten egg, sprinkled with grated cheese and spices, then cut into strips and twisted and that's it – ready for the oven. They're pleasantly light, but soften quickly as they cool, which isn't an ideal quality in a party snack (unless you happen to have a multi-Michelin-starred kitchen behind you, churning out fresh batches on demand).



Paula Deen recipe cheese straw. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Southern cook Paula Deen's recipe is the antithesis of the French masterchef's, creaming together butter and cheese then beating in self-raising flour and seasoning to create a rich dough, which requires piping on to the baking tray in 12cm long, 5cm wide strips. These jumbo straws expand during cooking into monsters – the kind of super-sized snacks that give American cooking a bad name. I find them a little too rich and heavy, but the intensely cheesy flavour goes down a storm with my flatmate, who declares her intention to make them, in a somewhat smaller guise, at Christmas.

Thankfully, Rose Prince comes to the rescue with a more sober British take on things, using a short pastry made with an equal weight of lard and butter. This is much lighter than Paula's efforts, which fall more into the biscuit category than any true wafer-thin straw, but crunchier and more satisfying than Michel's rather ethereal version. Perfect – and no need for any silly twisting either. Save that for the dancefloor.

The cheese

I'm largely of the opinion that you should use any cheese you might happen to have leftover here – particularly dry old hunks of stilton and rock-hard parmesan, because, as Mark Hix observes, "to get them thin and thoroughly cheesy the cheese needs to be as strong as you can get it", which generally means somewhere south of its prime.

However, assuming you don't hoard the stuff as I do, and have a free rein to purchase new ingredients for this recipe, I'd opt for parmesan, as Hix does. Michel Roux's Emmental and Rose Prince's suggested gruyère simply aren't powerful, or indeed salty enough, and most cheddar, as recommended by Paula Deen, is too damp. If you'd really prefer to use a British cheese, however, go for a really mature cheddar, preferably left unwrapped and somewhere cool and dry overnight.

The method



Ballymaloe recipe cheese straws. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Pastry aside, one of the principle problems with Michel Roux's recipe is that the grated cheese is simply sprinkled on top, which means that, when I come to roll up the twists, much of it simply falls out. The Ballymaloe Cookery School solves this problem by sprinkling the cheese on to the bottom half of the rolled-out pastry, and then folding the rest over the top, to make a kind of puff-pastry cheese sandwich, but better still is Mark Hix's method, which incorporates the cheese in three stages, rolling the pastry out afresh between each addition, so it's evenly distributed throughout the layers.

His straws are cheesy all the way through, and by far the best of all the puff versions that I attempt. Making your own pastry has some advantages however: both Paula and Rose Prince mix the cheese into the dough itself, which is much easier, and gives an even cheesier result. Also, it means that true cheese gluttons can snack on the leftover pastry scraps while cleaning up.

The extras

Obviously all you need for cheese straws is cheese and pastry, but if human nature was so easily satisfied, then we'd never have invented the Rubix Cube sandwich. Cayenne pepper is the southern classic favoured by Paula Deen, while Michel Roux adds sweet paprika, but, although I like the heat, I think mustard powder would work better with the cheese. I'm also tempted to add just a hint of nutmeg, to give them a bit of a festive flavour.

Ballymaloe add flaked almonds, which I think makes the straws rather too dry and heavy, as well as adding a confusing flavour – almonds and cheese are not a classic combination in my book. Rose Prince sandwiches hers with a layer of Gentleman's Relish – I do like the salty overload of anchovy and parmesan, but it's a little de trop for such simple snacks, as well as alienating a significant section of party guests. I'm keener on Mark Hix's final scattering of grated cheese, which crisps up beautifully in the oven, adding an extra layer of crunch.

A good tip from Ballymaloe; cheese straws are best eaten warm from the oven, but if you need to make them ahead, leave them to crisp up in a cool oven (100C) before removing to an air-tight container – they're less likely to soften.

Perfect cheese straws



Felicity's perfect cheese straws.

Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Cheese straws are undoubtedly the world's best party nibble: savoury, crisp and easy to make, they're a cheese football for the 21st century. To

make these vegetarian, substitute a vegetarian hard cheese, and drop the lard and use a total of 300g butter instead – but the lard makes the pastry lighter, so do use it if you can.

Makes about 50 straws

150g cold lard

150g cold butter

450g plain flour

150g parmesan, finely grated

½ tsp mustard powder

Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg

1 egg, beaten

1. Grate the lard and butter into a large bowl, and then add the flour. Rub in the fat until the mixture resembles coarse breadcrumbs, then stir in all but 2 tbsp cheese, the mustard powder and nutmeg.
2. Add just enough iced water (probably 2 – 4 tbsp) to bring it together into a firm dough, then wrap in clingfilm and chill for 30 minutes.
3. Pre-heat the oven to 200C. Roll out the pastry to ½cm thick, then brush with egg and sprinkle with the remaining parmesan. Cut into rectangular strips 1cm wide and 10cm long, and arrange on a lightly greased baking tray. (You could also cover and refrigerate it at this point, until you're ready to cook.)
4. Bake for about 15–20 minutes until golden brown, then cool briefly on a rack to firm up, and serve warm. They're best eaten warm from the oven, but if you need to make them ahead, leave them to crisp up in a cool oven (100C) before removing to an air-tight container – they're less likely to soften.

Are cheese straws your favourite party snack – or do you prefer something a little less practical? Can canapes ever be exciting, or will we always keep coming back to the classics – the sausage rolls, blinis and quail's eggs, and (in defiance of the Waitrose survey) cheese and pineapple, and devils on horseback?

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