



## How to cook the perfect croque monsieur

Is the croque monsieur the world's finest sandwich, or an overrated Parisian cafe cliché?



Felicity's perfect croque monsieur. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

The croque monsieur is a dish so iconically, ridiculously French that it's one of the first items of vocabulary that many aspiring linguists learn (trust the French to give the cheese and ham toasty a fancy name and pretend they invented it). Even Larousse Gastronomique, never shy of celebrating Gallic culinary achievement, admits the famous croque is nothing more than a "hot sandwich, made of 2 slices of buttered bread with the crusts removed, filled with thin slices of Gruyère cheese and a slice of lean ham."

Let's be frank: it's not up there with *tournedos rossini*, or even a croquebouché: indeed, the croque creation myth suggests it's the fortuitous result of workmen leaving their cheese and ham sandwiches next to a hot radiator all morning, and then discovering they rather enjoyed the result. A eureka moment indeed. Larousse prefers to credit the sandwich to a cafe on the grand Boulevard des Capucines in Paris – but neglects to mention that it also features ever so briefly in the second volume of Proust's *à la recherche de temps perdu*, possibly because in common with many they never made it past the first chapter.

That said, you can be sure that when the French tackle a dish they do so with enthusiasm, and it can't be denied that at its best a croque monsieur is a strong contender for the world's finest cheese and ham sandwich. The combination of nutty,

stringy Gruyère, soft, salty jambon blanc and crisp, buttery bread can give any speck and Taleggio panino or cheddar and baked ham toastie a run for its money. Ignore the sad, limp imitations on sale at French petrol stations (I can't speak for [this McDo version](#), however) and make your own instead: it's hardly complicated.

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## The bread

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Raymond Blanc recipe croque monsieur. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

As this is a sandwich, it makes sense to start with bread. Despite its status as a bona fide French cliché, the croque monsieur is made with a distinctly British-looking tin-baked loaf – in my experience, soft, sweet pain de mie is the most usual choice in the sandwich's home country. The sugary flavour and cotton wool-like texture have never seemed a happy choice to me however, so I'm open to suggestions.

Raymond Blanc comes up with the idea of [using wholemeal bread](#), which I've never seen in France, but I think it makes the croque taste depressingly worthy – this should be white bread territory. In Jamie magazine, meanwhile, Rebecca Rauter [specifies crusty bread](#) which, although it would be my preference for any other toasted cheese sandwich, seems in direct contradiction of the spirit of this particular version: Larousse is very clear that crusts must be cut off, which implies, to me at least, that the bread shouldn't be too chewy. That said, it needs to be strong enough to stand up to the weight of melted cheese, so no cheap stuff here. A good quality white sandwich loaf should do the trick.

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## The cheese

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Jamie magazine recipe croque monsieur. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Gruyère is a firm, slightly elastic mountain cheese with a slightly sweet, nutty flavour. Most importantly for our purposes, it melts magnificently. Wikipedia France, however, [claims that emmental is the more common choice](#) (possibly, I speculate slightly cynically, because it's considerably cheaper). I substitute it in the Jamie magazine recipe, and decide I'm prepared to push the boat out for a decent croque: emmental's milder flavour is distinctly underwhelming.

Julia Child, despite, one presumes, having consumed many a croque monsieur during her years in France, [gives a recipe](#) which calls for "mozzarella cheese or rather soft Swiss". Mozzarella, of course, dissolves like a dream when put in contact with heat, but, milky and unsalted, it lacks the distinctively cheesy flavour which the croque demands. Gruyère it is.

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## The bechamel

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Waitrose recipe croque monsieur. Photograph: Felicity

Cloake

Of course, there is one thing that sets the croque apart from other great cheese and ham toasted sandwiches, namely that it sometimes (although not always) arrives at the table drowned in golden and bubbling bechamel sauce. Jamie magazine opts for a very simple, cheese-free version to top the croque, saving the Gruyère for the filling, while [Saveur magazine not only uses it in the sauce](#) as well as the filling, but sticks in some heretical parmesan for good measure.

Although I find the plain bechamel a bit boring, I much prefer the sweeter [Gruyère-only version from the Waitrose website](#) to Saveur's salty sauce. The egg yolk they beat in as well is overkill though: let's be honest: this is not a dish that needs any added richness.

Julia and Raymond Blanc don't bother with bechamel at all, and their sandwiches seem rather dull and dry in comparison. Although, it must be admitted, it's a pretty high bar: toasted cheese and ham will always be delicious.

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## Flavourings

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Saveur recipe croque monsieur. Photograph: Felicity

Cloake

The croque, while essentially a simple beast, often comes accessorised with dijon mustard, the acidic heat tempering its outrageous cheesiness. Waitrose and Jamie magazine stir it into their bechamel, but to ensure a dollop in every mouthful, I'm going to spread it generously on to the bread like Saveur and Raymond Blanc. The customary pinch of nutmeg in the bechamel here becomes an inspired combination with the nutty sweetness of the cheese. No one dares to fiddle any further, however: a classic's a classic, and once you start adding pineapple or tomato, you're straying into official variation territory (a croque Hawaiian and a croque provençal respectively).

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## The cooking method

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Julia Child recipe croque monsieur. Photograph:

Felicity Cloake

Larousse explains that the croque is browned on both sides "either in butter in a frying pan or under the grill". Julia is in the frying camp while Raymond fries briefly and then finishes his wholemeal croque off in a hot oven for 5 minutes to melt the cheese (not a use of electricity I can stomach for a sandwich).

Saveur and Jamie magazine both opt for the grill, Saveur cleverly giving the ham and cheese-topped bread an initial blast of heat to melt the Gruyère before adding the second piece of bread and the bechamel sauce. The latter toasts the bread first, then adds the ham, cheese and bechamel all at once (he also leave it as an open sandwich – a croque rarebit, if you will – an accepted variation, perhaps, but too cheesy for my liking). Given the name (croque means crunch), Saveur's soft, bready version seems both inauthentic and texturally disappointing: as any Welshman will tell you, you really need to toast the bread before you add the cheese or things will quickly descend into a gooey mess.

I'm torn: my decision to use bechamel seems to rule out frying the sandwich in butter (which, of course, makes it completely and utterly delicious) but I'm not overly keen on Waitrose's clever use of the cheesy bechamel as a filling rather than a topping which seems to be the only way to combine both frying and bechamel. It seems too gloopy to belong in a sandwich.

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## Perfect croque monsieur

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Felicity's perfect

croque monsieur. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

In the end I decide to toast the bread first, as Jamie magazine does, but only on side to mimic the simultaneously soft and crisp texture one gets from frying. I'm also going to brush it with butter, to make it as robustly crunchy as possible – it should be able to withstand the bechamel on top, while yielding to the volcano of melted cheese within. And if you don't like that, then perhaps you'd be better off with a tuna wrap.

Makes 2

**50g butter, at room temperature**  
**4 slices of white bread, crusts cut off**  
**1 tbsp plain flour**  
**100ml milk**  
**80g Gruyère, grated**  
**Nutmeg, to grate**  
**2 tbsp dijon mustard**  
**2 slices of good ham**

1. Preheat the grill to medium-high, line the tray with foil and put the butter in a pan over a medium-low heat to melt it. Brush one side of each slice of bread liberally with melted butter and put under the grill butter-side uppermost until golden and crisp, then set aside.

2. Stir the flour into the remaining butter to make a paste, cook for a minute, then gradually whisk in the milk, a little at a time, until smooth. Simmer for a few minutes,

until thickened, then take off the heat and stir in 30g cheese until melted. Grate in a little nutmeg, stir and season lightly.

3. Spread the untoasted sides of the bread with mustard, then put the ham on top, followed by the cheese, and pop under the grill for a couple of minutes until the cheese has melted.

4. Top with the rest of the bread, with the toasted side uppermost, and push down, then put the sandwiches on to the grill tray and top with bechamel sauce. Grill for about 5 minutes, until golden and bubbling, and serve immediately.

Is the croque monsieur the world's finest toastie, or an overrated, overpriced Parisian cafe cliché? Do you prefer it plain, or drenched in bechamel sauce, fried or grilled – or even topped with a fried egg or, God forbid, a pineapple ring?

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