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A Cheesy Thanksgiving

Spruce up your festive meal with a well-loved comfort food

By Stacey Stein

A typical Thanksgiving feast is usually filled with comfort foods like mashed potatoes, stuffing and turkey. This makes it the perfect holiday for including another popular comfort food: cheese.

“Cheese fits in well with the concept of enjoying your food and getting pleasure from it while sharing family traditions,” says registered dietitian Shannon Crocker.

Beyond its great taste, cheese has the added bonus of being packed with nutrients. It contains several essential nutrients, such as calcium, which is vital for healthy bones and teeth, vitamin A and vitamin B12 – important for a healthy brain and nervous system. Cheese is also full of protein, critical for muscle mass.

As a fermented food, cheese also has gut health benefits. “This may have a bigger impact in terms of heart health and immunity,” says Crocker.

Cheese is also very versatile. Read on for some ideas on how to incorporate it into your Thanksgiving meal.

Appetizers

A cheese platter or cheese balls are go-to appetizers for festive meals or family gatherings, but there are other inventive ways to use cheese in appetizers for your Thanksgiving meal.

Take beer cheese (<https://www.gaylea.com/recipes/appetizers/horseradish-beer-cheese>), for example – served warm, it makes for a delicious fondue-like dip and the addition of horseradish cheddar gives it some zing. Try serving with crusty bread, crackers or fresh veggies.

This chipotle and white cheddar shortbread

(<https://www.gaylea.com/recipes/appetizers/chipotle-and-white-cheddar-shortbread>) is a great savoury app that can be made in advance and pairs nicely with a fall cider or beer. Prefer something on the sweeter side? Try this pear and dried cherry mascarpone dip

(<https://www.gaylea.com/recipes/appetizers/pear-and-dried-cherry-mascarpone>) – served warm, it goes nicely with crackers or fruit.

Starters & sides

Cheese is a great addition to almost any salad. This colourful roasted beet and herbed ricotta salad (<https://www.gaylea.com/recipes/dinner/roasted-beets-with-herbed-ricotta-and-pumpkin-seeds>) is perfect for fall and the ricotta rounds and roasted beets can be prepared ahead of time.

Potatoes au gratin is a warming dish that pairs well with the main event of the Thanksgiving feast. This version (<https://www.gaylea.com/recipes/appetizers/two-potato-three-canadian-cheese-gratin>) kicks it up a notch by using both sweet and yellow-fleshed potatoes along with three different kinds of cheeses. Looking to sneak more veggies into your Thanksgiving meal? This cauliflower risotto (<https://www.gaylea.com/recipes/dinner/creamy-cauliflower-risotto>) does the trick. Made with Parmesan cheese, cauliflower replaces Arborio rice – even the most discerning guest should be impressed.

If you're stuck for ideas on how to jazz up your greens (broccoli or green beans make for a classic side dish, but may not appeal to everyone), try making a crowd-pleasing cheese sauce (<https://www.gaylea.com/recipes/appetizers/classic-old-sharpe-cheese-sauce>) to instantly dress them up.

Mains

Turkey is the star of any Thanksgiving feast, but why not try a twist on the classic roasted turkey – and, even better, incorporate cheese? Surprise your guests this year by serving turkey breast stuffed with goat milk cheddar, roasted walnuts and cranberries.

Or you can opt for something simpler and stuff a turkey breast with your favourite cheese – either way, your guests will be pleasantly surprised when they dig in!

Dessert

Pecan, pumpkin and apple pie – these are all tried-and-true Thanksgiving desserts. This year, why not add in a few unexpected desserts to the mix? Cheese works just as well in dessert as it does in apps, sides and starters.

Crocker notes that there's a benefit to eating cheese after a meal as it helps reduce the risk of cavities by reducing acidity in the mouth. You can go with a classic cheese board – try a mix of different cheeses, along with some nuts and fruit.

If apple pie is on the menu for dessert, spruce it up by serving it with a wedge of cheddar – try a maple or honey cheddar for an interesting flavour contrast.

Another novel way to incorporate cheese into your Thanksgiving dessert is making pie crust with shredded cheddar cheese baked into it.

Apples tend to first come to mind when we think of the quintessential autumn fruit, so it's easy to forget that pears are also part of the fall harvest. Pears and cheese may seem like an unlikely combination, but they work well together in a simple roasted pear dessert.

Simply cut a pear in half, drizzle with some butter (feel free to add cinnamon and honey too), place in the oven in a baking dish (cut side facing up) and bake at 400 degrees for about 20 minutes. Once the pear is softened, remove from the oven and top with whipped mascarpone cheese – use one cup of whipping cream to one cup of mascarpone (whip the cream first and then beat in the mascarpone). When you're done you'll have a unique Thanksgiving dessert!

The final word

While we may focus fastidiously on eating healthfully throughout the year, Crocker emphasizes the importance of taking a break from rigorous calorie counting during festive holiday meals.

“It's one meal and one day, so just sit back and enjoy it,” she says. “Food is so much more than the nutrients it brings – when you're sharing food and family traditions, give yourself permission to enjoy it.”

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