Sharp and creamy with a kick, a spoonful of our favorite spread makes everything better.

by BETTY TERRY

THE SOUTH'S BEST
PIMIENTO CHEESE
Throughout the South, there is one immutable truth: We Southerners love our ‘menna cheese. For generations, this concoction of sharp Cheddar cheese and roasted red bell peppers, bound together with mayonnaise, has been a favorite at lunchtime tables, Southern cocktail parties, and just for snacking. But now, the beloved patê of the South has found its way onto menus at some of the South’s finest restaurants and well-loved neighborhood eateries. Here are some of our favorites.

TUPELO HONEY CAFE
ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

While the Tupelo Honey Cafe reveres the time-honored traditions of Southern cooking, Chef Brian Sonokus likes to give his Southern dishes a decidedly different (and creative) spin at this Asheville eatery. That especially goes for the house pimiento cheese, which he flavors with Dijon mustard and fresh parsley and serves warm with tortilla chips. “Shoo Mercy” is the Tupelo Honey Cafe’s slang for bumping a recipe up to the next level. And what that means will become clear when you taste what the menu calls “the most mind-blowing grilled cheese on the planet,” the Shoo Grill Cheese. Have Mercy. In addition to pimiento cheese, it’s made with Havarti cheese, caramelized onions, maple-peppered bacon, city ham, fried green tomatoes, and fresh basil on sourdough wheat bread.

12 College St.
828.255.4863
tupelohoneycafe.com
THE BAR AT LEMAIRe
RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

We can’t imagine a more pleasant way to spend an evening in Richmond than sitting on the open-air patio at the Bar at Lemaire with a cocktail and the bar’s signature white Cheddar pimiento cheese. A popular dish on the bar’s menu since the restaurant opened inside The Jefferson Hotel in 2009, it’s served with olives and toasted sourdough bread. Chef Walter Bundy has infused everything on the menu at Lemaire with his commitment to providing upscale Southern cuisine that showcases Virginia-grown ingredients and the Southern influences of his native Richmond. The pimiento cheese is no exception.

101 W Franklin St.
804.649.4629
lemairerestaurant.com

UNDERBELLY
HOUSTON, TEXAS

Chef Chris Shepherd has been known to visit family-owned ethnic restaurants in some of Houston’s most culturally diverse neighborhoods in search of new techniques and flavor combinations. So it comes as no surprise that Underbelly’s pimiento cheese goes off in a different direction than other recipes for this classic Southern spread. Chris starts with Redneck Cheddar, a Texas farmstead cheese from Velduhizen Family Farm that’s soaked in a dark Texas beer during the production process. Then, he replaces the traditional mayonnaise with Mississippi’s comeback Sauce, a happy inspiration that occurred when he was using the spicy condiment in another dish. Underbelly’s menu changes constantly, and pimiento cheese shows up in some surprising ways. Lately, the restaurant has been serving it with pork cracklings as chips. And in summer, Chris likes to pair it with grilled okra. One word of caution: Before making a pilgrimage to Underbelly for the pimiento cheese, you should call first. It’s not a regular menu item.

1100 Westheimer Rd.
713.528.9800
underbellyhouston.com
shrimp with pimiento cheese grits at Underbelly
The pimiento cheese at Empire State South has been a hit with Atlanta diners since the restaurant opened in 2010. Hugh Acheson perfected his pimiento cheese recipe at his Athens, Georgia, restaurant Five & Ten, and it's one of the few recipes from his restaurants that are included in his cookbook, A New Turn in the South (Clarkson Potter, 2011). But at Empire State South, diners treasure the pimiento cheese not for what's in it, but for what's on it. It's delivered to your table in a 4-ounce Mason jar topped with a layer of sweet-and-spicy bacon marmalade, made with Benton's hickory-smoked bacon. Pimiento cheese goes solo as an appetizer on the lunch menu, but at dinner, it's paired with deviled ham, trout mousse, and peanut hummus in a starter called "In Jars," where the revered Southern spread holds its own against these worthy newcomers. If you're in a hurry, drop by and pick up premade pimiento cheese sandwiches from the restaurant's Grab and Go menu at lunchtime. Or, take home a jar for just $6. And, yes, the take-home jars include a layer of bacon marmalade.

999 Peachtree St. NE #140
404.541.1105
empirestatesouth.com
The pimiento cheese at Butcher & Bee, a craft sandwich shop in Charleston, South Carolina, is pretty straightforward—shredded Cheddar cheese, roasted red peppers, mayonnaise, hot sauce, and one secret ingredient, pickle juice. It's not about what's in the recipe but how they make it and what they do with it that makes this rendition of the pâté of the South something special. Everything at Butcher & Bee is made from scratch each day; they even grate the Cheddar for their pimiento cheese by hand. And then, they layer it with ham and honey on a sub sandwich or tuck it into a brioche bun with a fried egg. Or, they spread it on a biscuit for breakfast. If you make a special trip to Butcher & Bee to try the pimiento cheese, it's best to call first. You can also check the restaurant's menu, which changes daily and is posted on Facebook and Twitter. Pimiento cheese is not offered at the restaurant every day, but when it is, it's worth the trip.

654 King St.
843.619.0202
butcherandbee.com

The Pantry, a farmstead café and food boutique in the Birmingham suburb of Mountain Brook, takes an untraditional approach to pimiento cheese, and it shows. They begin with goat cheese, produced 30 miles down the road in Harpersville at owner Deborah Stone's Stone Hollow Farmstead. Then, they make their own mayonnaise, a duck-egg aioli flavored with thyme, rosemary, and garlic. "We mix our pimiento cheese by hand," explains Deborah. "No machines are used to make it." Deborah says she likes to have full control over what goes into her pimiento cheese. (This summer, she plans to begin growing and pickling her own pimientos.) That approach goes for the other foods offered at The Pantry as well, where almost everything is grown by Deborah or her farmer friends. "We know where our food comes from," she says. "And we grow it as sustainably and as organically as possible." The result is a fresh and bright pimiento cheese that is great spread between two slices of flatbread for a pimiento cheese sandwich, served in a trio of salads on The Pantry's chicken salad plate, or piled high on pickled beets, radishes, and squash on a crudité plate.

17 Dexter Ave.
205.803.3585
stonehollowfarmstead.com/pantry.php

Most restaurants roll out the welcome mat for diners. At the Jack Allen's Kitchen locations in Austin and Round Rock, Texas, they roll out the pimiento cheese. Every meal begins with a plate of Jack's signature pimiento cheese and house-made flatbread crackers, a welcome that is never overlooked. Their unique recipe, which includes Monterey Jack, Cheddar cheese, cream cheese, a little Worcestershire sauce, and sherry vinegar, is one of chef/owner Jack Gilmore's favorite snacks. "I thought it would be great to start everyone off at the restaurant with a little Southern hospitality," he explains. "It always leaves them wanting more." If, indeed, you want more pimiento cheese, you can order more or have it layered with pork belly, micro greens, fried green tomatoes, and slaw on BLT Sliders or baked in a pimiento cheese-potato gratin. Jack also recommends using it as a topping on a burger. And if you still haven't had your fill of this creamy pimiento cheese, you can take home an 8-ounce jar for $5.

7720 Texas 71 W.
512.852.8558
jackatienstkitchen.com