

It is December 1981. Our kitchen table is surrounded by twelve first grade girls, all swathed in various shades of magenta and violet, guests of my eighth birthday party. The clown-slash-balloon artiste has just left and it is time for the meal I have chosen above all others for my big day. **Cheese fondue.**

STORY, PHOTOS & STYLING
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Serves 4-6.

16 ounces Emmentaler swiss cheese (roughly 4 cups grated)
8 ounces Gruyere cheese (roughly 2 cups grated)
1 tablespoon corn starch
2 cloves garlic, cut in half
1 ½ cups dry white wine

Note: If you prefer to make the recipe without alcohol, you can replace the wine with water with enough fresh lemon juice added to approximate the acidity of the wine.

Optional:
1-2 teaspoons of Lemon juice
1-2 teaspoons of Kirsch, cherry brandy

Equipment:
Stovetop-safe glazed earthenware pot or enamel-lined cast iron pot
Hot plate or sterno flame, to keep warm once transferred from the stove

Thoroughly grate both cheeses and combine in a large mixing bowl. Add cornstarch and gently toss to evenly distribute throughout the cheese.

With the cut-side of the garlic cloves, rub the inside of the pot, leaving the garlic in the bottom. Add the wine and over a low heat, slowly bring it to a simmer. Remove the garlic and discard.

A small handful at a time, slowly add the cornstarch coated grated cheese to the wine, whisking gently but constantly as you go, over very low heat. Adding too quickly, in too large amounts, with too large pieces, and over too high heat, will all risk the fondue "breaking," with the oil from the cheeses separating from the milk solids. Take your time, stir continually and resist the temptation to increase the heat.

When all of the cheese has been added, continue to stir over low heat until you have a creamy, even sauce that coats the back of your spoon. If the mixture seems too thick, you can add white wine, a small amount at a time. If desired, add kirsch to taste. Keep the fondue on the stove over low heat to serve, or transfer the entire pot to your serving area, keeping it warm with either a fondue burner and stand or a hot plate.

Serve with large cubes of crusty bread, and perhaps sliced apples or grapes, or roasted or blanched vegetables, all for dipping. At the end of the meal at the bottom of the pot there may be a darker golden crust of well-cooked cheese, affectionately called *la religieuse*. Gently pry it from the bottom of the pot, cut into large shards and share it with the group.

Note: If your sauce should happen to separate or break, lower the heat even more and try adding some lemon juice, about a teaspoon at a time, whisking vigorously as you do.



Classic, Swiss, gooey, robust, rich, creamy, fondue au fromage. The entire house is so filled with smells of gruyere, emmenthaler, garlic and warm bread, I could hardly focus on the poor clown. We have been grating cheese and cutting bread cubes for days. I make some introduction with a small flourish of my fondue fork and invite everyone to dig in. A few do, a few are already intimidated by the stinky cheese vapors swirling from the cauldron. So when my mother casually adds that if anyone would rather have a hot dog we also have a few of those on hand for back-up, twelve hands snap in the air. More fondue for me.

As I was growing up my father's parents lived in Istanbul and would travel through Switzerland on their way back to the States to visit us. Fine and assertive Swiss cheeses were long a part of my vocabulary. And my mother's parents, living ten minutes away, seemed to always have a dinner party simmering frequently with a fondue pot nestled on their coffee table. None of those fabulous citrus-hued mid-century wedding registry pots gathered dust with us.

The Swiss national dish, a classic cheese fondue, is nearly effortless, but so decadent and special, making it perfect for cold weather gatherings and celebrations. The communal aspect of fondue is my favorite, bringing everyone together over an impossibly rich pot of spectacular and simple ingredients. Everyone gets a little messy, everyone shares a little in the preparation, no worry of food getting cold, and no time limit, until the pot runs dry.

A traditional cheese fondue, and my favorite, is a combination of emmenthaler and gruyere cheeses, garlic, dry white wine, perhaps some starch to help the sauce come together, and sometimes a bit

of kirsch cherry brandy, originally added if the cheeses were too young and not ripe enough. But each state, or canton, in Switzerland has its own version, including a fondue au crémant from Geneva, using champagne and cognac, and one from eastern Switzerland using appenzeller and vacherin cheeses with a dry hard cider. So deeply ingrained in Switzerland's food culture the precise origins of fondue are hard to pinpoint, but the dish is traced back at least centuries and is thought to have started as a practice to make use of stale bread and old bits of cheese during leaner winter months.

Through the years a classic cheese fondue keeps crossing my path, making the gatherings it is served at feel a little more special and infinitely more memorable. And the slow food, uncomplicated nostalgic retro vibe of seeing a fondue pot on a table feels very right for what I value about food and cooking right now, perhaps taking the opportunity to make use of day old bread and odd bits of cheese myself. Fondue is from the French verb *fondre*: To melt. Come in from the cold, sit down, slow down, cozy up next to cherished friends, share great food, and melt.