

Nachos

Why This Recipe Works: The availability of prepackaged shredded cheese and jars or tubs of premade salsa and guacamole has transformed nachos from something delicious into bland, stale-tasting fast food. We wanted nachos with hot, crisp tortilla chips, plentiful cheese and toppings, and the right amount of spicy heat.

To ensure that all of the chips would be cheesy and spicy, we layered tortilla chips with a full pound of shredded cheddar cheese and sliced jalapeños. Layering the jalapeños with the cheese also helped the chiles stick to the chips. We prepared a quick homemade salsa and chunky guacamole to spoon around the edges of the hot nachos after they came out of the oven. Spoonfuls of sour cream and a sprinkling of chopped fresh scallions provided final touches. Served with lime wedges, this fresh take on nachos is light-years beyond any fast-food version of the dish.

Cheesy Nachos with Guacamole and Salsa

Serves 4 to 6

- 8 ounces tortilla chips
- 1 pound cheddar cheese, shredded (about 4 cups)
- 2 large jalapeño chiles, sliced thin (about 1/4 cup)
- 2 scallions, sliced thin
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- 1 recipe One-Minute Salsa (recipe follows)
- 1 recipe Chunky Guacamole (page 280)
- Lime wedges, for serving

Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 400 degrees. Spread half of the chips in an even layer in a 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Sprinkle the chips evenly with 2 cups of the cheese and half of the jalapeño slices. Repeat with the remaining chips, cheese, and jalapeños. Bake until the cheese is melted, 7 to 10 minutes. Remove the nachos from the oven and sprinkle with the scallions. Along the edge of the baking dish, drop scoops of the sour cream, salsa, and guacamole. Serve immediately, passing the lime wedges separately.

One-Minute Salsa

Makes about 1 cup

This quick salsa can be made with either fresh or canned tomatoes. If you like, replace the jalapeño with 1/2 chipotle chile in adobo sauce, minced.

- 2 tablespoons chopped red onion
- 2 tablespoons fresh cilantro leaves
- 2 teaspoons juice from 1 lime
- 1/2 small jalapeño chile, stemmed and seeded (about 1 1/2 teaspoons) (see note)
- 1 small garlic clove, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 1/2 teaspoon)
- 1/4 teaspoon table salt
- Pinch ground black pepper
- 2 small ripe tomatoes, each cored and cut into eighths, or one (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained

Pulse all the ingredients except the tomatoes in a food processor until minced, about 5 pulses, scraping down the sides of the workbowl as necessary. Add the tomatoes and pulse until roughly chopped, about 2 pulses.

Guacamole

Why This Recipe Works: Not only eaten as a party dip, guacamole is also the traditional accompaniment to several Mexican dishes. Unfortunately, it often has so many ingredients that the primary one—the avocado—becomes overshadowed by secondary ingredients. We wanted to get back to the basics of this dish, emphasizing the avocado.

Hass avocados, the dark, pebbly-skinned type, work best, and they must be ripe; they should yield slightly to a gentle squeeze. We wanted a chunky texture in our guacamole, so instead of mashing or pureeing the avocados we diced two of them and mashed one lightly. Combining the avocados gave the guacamole a chunky, cohesive texture. As for flavorings, just a bit of finely minced onion provided some bite but not overwhelming onion flavor. Lime juice was essential for its bright citrus flavor. Cumin, a jalapeño, and fresh cilantro rounded out the dip's flavors. Cool and creamy, our guacamole makes a perfect partner to a bowl of tortilla chips or a garnish to a variety of Mexican dishes.

Chunky Guacamole

Makes 2 1/2 to 3 cups

To minimize the risk of discoloration, prepare the minced ingredients first so they are ready to mix with the avocados as soon as they are cut. Ripe avocados are essential here. To test for ripeness, try to flick the small stem off the end of the avocado. If it comes off easily and you can see green underneath it, the avocado is ripe. If it does not come off or if you see brown underneath after prying it off, the avocado is not ripe. If you like, garnish the guacamole with diced tomatoes and chopped cilantro just before serving.

- 3 medium, ripe avocados (see note)
- 1/4 cup minced fresh cilantro leaves
- 2 tablespoons minced onion
- 1 small jalapeño chile, stemmed, seeded, and minced
- 1 medium garlic clove, minced or pressed through a garlic press (about 1 teaspoon)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin (optional)
- Table salt
- 2 tablespoons juice from 1 lime

1. Halve 1 avocado, remove the pit, and scoop the flesh into a medium bowl. Mash the flesh lightly with the cilantro, onion, jalapeño, garlic, cumin (if using), and 1/4 teaspoon salt with the tines of a fork until just combined.

2. Halve, pit, and cube the remaining 2 avocados. Add the cubes to the bowl with the mashed avocado mixture.

3. Sprinkle the lime juice over the diced avocado and mix the entire contents of the bowl lightly with a fork until combined but still chunky. Season with salt, if necessary, and serve. (The guacamole can be covered with plastic wrap, pressed directly onto the surface of the mixture, and refrigerated for up to 1 day. Return the guacamole to room temperature, removing the plastic wrap at the last moment, before serving.)