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Guardian****News** **Opinion** **Sport** **Culture** **Lifestyle***i***Snacks****Ice-cream with gherkins! Mash sandwiches! Maltesers in wine! 21 weird snacks loved by top chefs**

Away from their restaurants, chefs improvise in extraordinary ways. Here are some of the killer combinations they wouldn't dare put on their menus

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Chefs are grazing animals, forever playing with ingredients, nibbling at leftovers and then, back home at 1am, trying to conjure a quick bite from whatever is there. In these moments of curiosity and urgency, bizarre snack

habits are born. “People think we go home and have elaborate dinners, but give me some string cheese, chilli sauce, a Fab and a Stella and I’ll be happy,” says Jack Stein, the chef director at the Rick Stein group. At work, chefs are surrounded by the finest ingredients. At home, they frequently crave “simple things”, he says.

“You never think about your own fridge and what you’re going to feed yourself,” says Meriel Armitage, the founder of the Club Mexicana restaurants in London. So when chefs arrive home “really late and really hungry”, they improvise - in extraordinary ways. “I guess we’re confident in putting weird combos together that most people would be quite scared of,” she says.

She is not wrong. From Pot Noodle hacks to radical fusions of sweet and savoury, chefs frequently eat things they would never dream of putting on a menu - as the following examples show.

Vanilla ice-cream and wasabi peas

The origin of this curveball is one many will recognise. “I was bored in lockdown,” says Ramael Scully. A chef with too much time on his hands and too many wasabi peas in his cupboards, the co-owner of Scully restaurant in St James’s, central London, decided to crush and sprinkle them over vanilla ice-cream. “The plain flavour and creaminess of the vanilla works beautifully with exhilarating wasabi,” he says. “Close your eyes and you could be eating cream and horseradish, one of my favourite flavour combos. And the colour contrast looks great.”



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Buried Babybel Pot Noodle

Tom Aronica, the chef at Bench restaurant in Sheffield, was doing a guest cooking slot at Belzan in Liverpool when, in a moment of post-service giddiness, he revealed this trick - developed with a student housemate - to his host, Belzan's Sam Grainger. This "top-tier weirdness" will "change your life", promises Grainger.

Take one chicken and mushroom Pot Noodle, remove the noodles, drop in a Babybel, reinsert the noodles and add hot water. "It's like those ice-creams with chewing gum at the bottom, except it's a cheesy, melted delight in a Pot Noodle," says Grainger. "It's a glorious, go-to snack."

Wotsits with black pepper sriracha

Chefs love to jazz up crisps. Si Toft, the chef-owner at the Dining Room in the Welsh village of Abersoch, seasons Quavers with Worcestershire sauce ("Quick shake to disperse, not saturate"), while, in Northumberland, Pine's head chef, Ian Waller, can be found dipping Wotsits into black pepper chilli sauces, such as Flying Goose's sriracha. "This was a Saturday night desperation snack. You'll try anything zero-effort after a long shift," says Waller. It proved revelatory: "Spicy, cheesy, umami, delicious." Other srirachas work to varying degrees, but the Wotsits' interaction with a black pepper version is "world class", he says.

Jacob's cracker, cream cheese, strawberry jam

Adam Reid, the chef at the French in Manchester, has been topping crackers with cream cheese and strawberry jam since childhood. "I don't think it's that out-there; it's like cheese and chutney," he says, adding that the jam should be used with restraint: "It's more of a savoury thing with a sweet kick."

Gherkin-clad skinny fries

For fastidious chefs, shaking vinegar on to chips is far too haphazard. At A Peculiar Tea in Belfast, when skinny fries are served at staff meals, they arrive with a side of thinly sliced dill pickles, which you can fold around a fry or two. That way, you get double crunch and guaranteed vinegary tang in every bite. "You can't ask for more than that," says the chef patron, Gemma Austin.



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Pom-Bear and Dairy Milk sandwich

A performer friend, “always on the lookout for a quick, mid-show snack”, introduced Sami Harvey, the chef at the Laundry in Brixton, south London, to the delicacy that is a square of Dairy Milk sandwiched between the bellies of two Pom-Bear crisps. “Sweet, salty, crisp outside, soft in the middle; it ticks all the boxes,” she says. “Squeeze the mini-sandwich together so the chocolate starts to soften.”

Vanilla ice-cream and pickles

It first happened in McDonald’s - an accidental meeting of gherkin and McFlurry that revealed to Lungile Mhlanga, the owner of the doughnut cafe the Treats Club in Shoreditch, east London, “how good they were together”. Acting in a similar way to the salt in salted caramel, a salty pickle “balances the ice-cream perfectly”, she says. Use pickles with a sweeter flavour profile, such as Kühne’s sweet and sour gherkins, and you may well be taken aback by the result: “It’s a ‘don’t knock it till you’ve tried it’ snack I swear by.”

Vegan instant noodle sandwich

To achieve this double-carb heaven, shop around for what Club Mexicana’s Armitage calls a “ninja vegan product” - vegan “chicken” noodles. (Tesco and Sainsbury’s do own-brand versions.) At home, she likes to boost these with chilli flakes, sesame seeds and spring onions, before slapping them between slices of white bread; vegan butter is

optional. Drain the noodles, but not too much: “You want a bit of juice - that’s where the flavour is and it’ll soak into the bread. These expand in your stomach like you’ve had a feast.”

Mash sandwiches

Talking of double carbs, in his early days in hotel kitchens, Gopi Chandran, the executive chef at Sopwell House in St Albans, would often find himself making mashed potato, which he took to munching between slices of burnt toast leftover at breakfast: “I added chopped bacon, mayonnaise, cheddar. Then the sauce chef made a fresh fish batter. I’d dip the whole sandwich in and fry it. The ultimate! We’d cut this into triangles, alongside triple-cooked duck fat chips. Now I make a fresh mash sandwich with bacon and jalapeños.”



📷 Composite: Alamy/Getty Images

Pringles with caviar

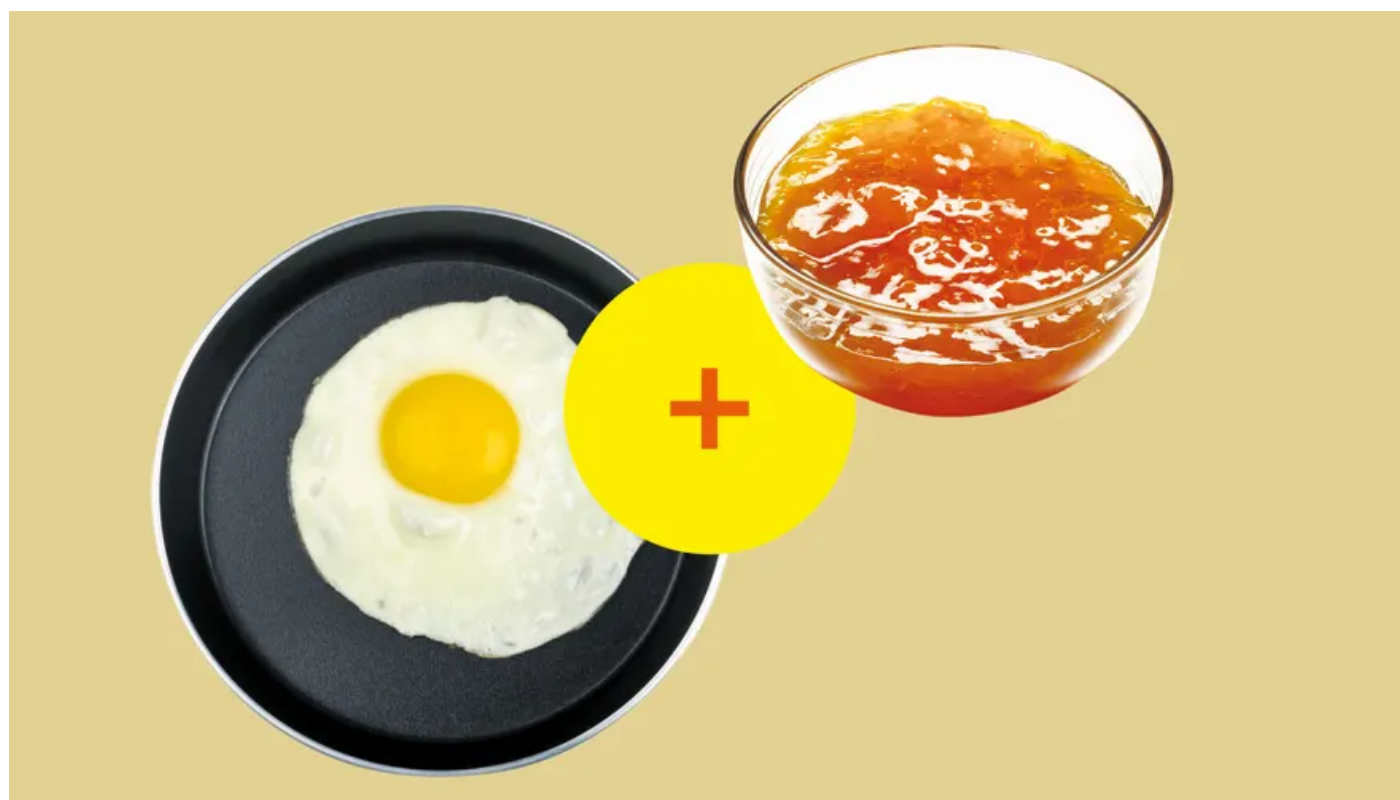
For years, Alex Webb - who has an eponymous restaurant at the InterContinental London Park Lane - has been dipping Pringles into leftover sauces and purees as a post-service snack. But sour cream and chive Pringles with caviar stays with him as a dream coupling. At a previous restaurant, he even served this combo as a canapé with crème fraîche and fresh chives. “The fishiness of the eggs and the saltiness work well together. Pringles are quite addictive anyway; adding caviar brings it to another level.”

Red-wine-marinated Maltesers

A friend taught Grace Bryson, the chef at London Shell Co in Highgate, to pop a Malteser in her glass of red to create “a little treat” that she has grown to love. She recommends using a rich, full-bodied red. Wine aficionados, however, may need some persuading. “You should have seen the look my sommelier gave me when I mentioned it,” she says. “She was fuming. Proper death stare.”

Sushi-seasoned fries

Judy Joo, the founder of the Seoul Bird restaurants in London, likes to use sushinoko, a dehydrated vinegar and seasoning powder designed to dress sushi, “sprinkled liberally on fries. With a hint of sweetness, it’s the ultimate salt and vinegar.”



📷 Composite: Alamy/Getty Images

Fried egg and apricot jam sandwiches

Long before he became the executive chef at the Riding House cafes in London, Henry Omereye worked in a factory making takeaway boxes. One morning, in the canteen, he ordered fried eggs, toast and apricot jam - intending to eat them separately - but, after realising he was running late, combined the lot and wolfed it down: “It just worked. I’ve been having that for breakfast every once in a while since. Everyone looks at me weird, like: ‘What you doing?’ but it tastes amazing. For some reason, the jam seems to heighten the flavour of the egg.”

French’s mustard on Ryvita with Oxo dip

“Chefs are surrounded by food all our their working life. At midnight, at home, it’s different. You want a naughty fix,” says Neil Bentinck, the chef-owner at Skosh in York. Mustard-topped Ryvita is quick and tasty. he says: “I’ll eat that, stick my hand in a jar of pickled chillies and, if it’s Friday night, I might treat myself to a bit of cheese, raw vegetables and an Oxo cube.” Sorry, an Oxo cube? “I’ll sprinkle an Oxo - the classic chicken one tastes best - and dip cucumber, carrot or celery into it. It’s like umami salt.”

Pot Noodle nachos

“My snacking habits are normal, to me,” says Scott Smith, the head chef at the Oarsman in Marlow. But, like his wife, you may struggle to understand his fondness for dunking oatcakes in Bisto gravy seasoned with cracked white pepper (“That’s class”) or his habit of tipping a Pot Noodle over Doritos. “The dream combo is Cool Original Doritos with a Bombay Bad Boy,” he says. “But, to be honest, they all work.”

Cheesestrings and Frank’s RedHot

In the mid-00s, Stein drove around the US exploring barbecue food. During the trip, he picked up the habit of dipping one new discovery - Cheesestrings - into another: hot cayenne or chilli sauces. “It’s a mild cheese; it needs a lift,” he says. “String it really efficiently, then just dip it into the top of the bottle.”

Chocolate fudge cake and feta cheese

An accidental early convert to the amplified flavours of salty chocolate, Kemal Demiral used to eat this sweet, umami duo as an after-school snack. “The saltiness of the feta against the chocolate makes you salivate. To me, it’s a killer combination,” says the chef-founder at the Counter in Notting Hill, west London.

Frozen bocconcini and honey

Little frozen balls of mild and creamy fior di latte (cow’s milk) mozzarella, preferably dipped in rosemary honey, are “just like ice-cream bombes,” according to Masha Rener, the head chef at Lina Stores in London.

‘Sad salad’ sandwich

Ever wondered what to do with yesterday’s lemon-and-oil-dressed green salad? “Do not throw out wilted, lemony greens,” orders Jacob Kenedy, the creator of Bocca di Lupo and Plaquemine Lock in London. Instead, sandwich the leaves between slices of dense, buttered brown bread. “The crispy-limp, lemon-oily, bittersweet leaves are delicious against creamy butter and earthy brown bread. Nothing sad about it at all,” he says.

Salty fries and McDonald’s milkshakes

You may think this is an urban myth, a specious TikTok trend or something only American children do, but chefs are on board. “Strawberry milkshake kind of makes sense. Strawberries and tomatoes have many shared [flavour] components. It’s like having ketchup, but with temperature contrast,” says Chet Sharma, the chef-founder at BiBi in Mayfair, west London. Liz Cottam, the owner of Home in Leeds, agrees that the sweet, creamy and salty combo is “a vibe”. She has gone even further; she loves dipping fries in the caramel-adjacent sauce dulce de leche.

Walkers Sensations Thai sweet chilli crisps and Haribo Tangfastics

Robert Pearce, the executive chef at Down Hall hotel in Essex, was at a family party when he made this bold culinary breakthrough. “One of the kids had mixed them together. I knew chilli and chocolate go well together, so I thought I’d try it and it ended up being quite nice.” There is a tension between salty, sour and sweetness in this chaotic mix: “They almost cut through each other, but you still get the chilli heat at the end.” There is an added bonus, too: “Once it’s all mixed in a bowl, no one wants to share with you.”