

Croque Monsieur

$\frac{3}{4}$ pound smoked, sliced ham
 $\frac{1}{2}$ pound Gruyere, grated
4 thick slices good-quality white bread
3 tablespoons flour
3 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons softened butter
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups milk
Nutmeg to taste
Black pepper to taste
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
1 bay leaf

Heat the milk and the salt in a small saucepan until it begins to simmer.

Melt 3 tablespoons of butter in a heavy sauce pan. When the butter is melted, whisk in the flour until the mixture is smooth. Cook for a minute or two, then whisk in all the hot milk at once. Bring to a boil and continue to beat until the mixture is very thick and smooth. Add the bay leaf, the freshly ground nutmeg, and the black pepper, and continue to simmer on very low heat for 5-10 minutes, stirring frequently. Add $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of the grated Gruyere to the sauce, stirring until it melts. Remove from the heat and set aside.

Cut the bread into four $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick slices. Spread both sides of the bread with the softened butter. Heat in a skillet until the bread is nicely toasted. Turn the slices and toast on the other side. Remove the bread to a broiler pan.

In the same skillet, heat the ham slices on both sides, just until speckles of brown appear. Remove the bay leaf from the Mornay sauce. Spread a thin layer of sauce on the bread slices, then arrange the ham slices on top of it.

Spread a thick layer of Mornay sauce to cover the ham on each slice. Lightly press the remainder of the grated cheese into the Mornay sauce.

Place under a broiler for several minutes, until the sauce is bubbly and begins to develop golden brown spots. Check the broiler frequently to be sure that the croques are not burning.

Serve with cornichons.