

## Baked jalapeño poppers the perfect starter for the New Year



**Chorizo-Jalapeño Poppers**

Photo Susie Iventosch

### By Susie Iventosch

A friend served these tasty baked jalapeño poppers for hors d'oeuvres one night and we thoroughly enjoyed them. The novelty of adding chorizo to the cheese filling and wrapping them in bacon made them pretty darn irresistible. When we made them, we added some grated sharp cheddar cheese and a sprinkling of Tajin seasoning and we loved that addition, too.

Lately, the jalapeños have been pretty big in the markets

and this recipe makes 20 poppers from 10 good-sized peppers. If you find smaller peppers, you can make more than 20 with this recipe.

When it comes to the chorizo, Cacique makes pork, beef or soy versions, which are available at most grocers, and Jennie-O offers a turkey chorizo as well. But, you can also make your own chorizo by adding chili pepper, cumin, coriander, oregano, garlic, onion and lime juice to any kind of ground meat. I've made my own with elk and venison, too.

We like turkey and duck bacon best, and those are usu-

ally precooked, so if you use them, reduce the baking time by

a few minutes.

### Chorizo-Jalapeño Poppers

#### Ingredients

10 jalapeño peppers, cut in half lengthwise, seeds and veins removed  
10 oz. chorizo (pork, beef, turkey or soy)  
4 oz. sharp white or yellow cheddar cheese, grated  
8 oz. cream cheese  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
1 teaspoon Tajin Classic Seasoning (or lime chili seasoning)  
10 strips of thin-cut bacon (pork, turkey, or duck), cut in half length-wise

#### DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 400 F. Prepare a baking sheet with cooking spray.

Cook chorizo in a pan over medium heat until crumbled and cooked through. Sop up any pools of extra fat with paper towels. (Turkey or soy chorizo will have very little fat, but beef and pork will have quite a bit.) Set chorizo aside to cool.

Cut jalapeños in half, leaving the stem intact, if possible. Scoop out seeds and veins and lay peppers out on the baking sheet with the cavity side facing up.

In a small bowl, beat cream cheese with a fork or electric beater until creamy and soft. Stir in grated cheddar, cooked chorizo, garlic and Tajin. (If you want an easy version, add cooked and crumbled bacon to this mixture, but otherwise, wait to wrap the filled peppers with the bacon strips.)

Fill cavities of the cleaned jalapeño halves with the cream cheese mixture. Fill all the way up to the top.

Now, for the bacon you can either wrap it around each stuffed jalapeño half, or you can cut a strip just the length of the jalapeño and lay it over the top of the filling. Using either method, gently press it into the filling to keep it in place, and if wrapping the bacon around the pepper, tuck the last part of the strip of bacon under the first part to help keep it secure.

\*You can also just mix precooked, crumbled bacon to the filling for an easy version. See above.

Bake at 400 F for approximately 15-20 minutes, or until the bacon is cooked and the cheese filling is bubbly and beginning to turn a nice golden-brown.

Serve hot!

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## Santa and his elf bring much joy to Rheem Valley Manor neighborhood



Elf Jeff Stone and Santa Ryan Aull with his two youngest elves, Zoe, 10 months and Carter, 2 1/2 years.

### By Diane Claytor

Before heading back to the North Pole to clean up his workshop, or traveling to the warm beaches of Florida for a well-deserved rest, Santa made one more trip through Moraga's Rheem Valley Manor on Christmas morning. He parked his sleigh on Fernwood and rode around with one of his favorite elves in a pristine, bright yellow 1932 Ford truck, delighting neighborhood kids of all ages.

The two Moraga resi-

dents, Santa Ryan Aull and elf Jeff Stone, agreed that this was one of the most joyous experiences of their lives. "We came back feeling so good," Stone said.

The quickly planned neighborhood treat was the idea of Aull's wife, Sophie. She has a friend in San Diego whose husband drove around their housing development dressed as Santa, waving at kids. Seeing the pictures prompted Sophie Aull to convince her husband and his friend to do something simi-



Photos Sophie Aull

Rheem Valley Manor residents greet Santa and his elf.

lar. "Our wives agreed and before you knew it, we were elf and Santa driving around," Stone said.

They decided on the route: Rheem Valley Manor because that's where both the Aull and Stone families live and where they have many friends. They picked the time: from 11 a.m. to noon on Christmas, "because families would be together and it's before nap time and after presents, so would fit into a nice window," Sophie Aull explained.

Costumes were obtained; Santa's came from a family member, the elf's was purchased. The beautifully restored 88-year-old truck belongs to Stone. Local friends were notified when Sophie Aull sent a text, announcing there was a rumor going around that Santa was planning a neighborhood appearance.

At the designated time, Aull and Stone boarded their "sleigh." Ryan Aull, concerned that no one would know they were coming, suggested Stone

honk the horn. He started with short beeps and the more they drove, the more he leaned on the horn, Stone said. "We started seeing people peeking through blinds and shutters," Ryan Aull described, "and then all of a sudden, the door would open and families would come running out." Stone added, "You could just see the excitement on the kids' faces. It was really powerful."

Lafayette resident Kim Roth, spending Christmas at her Rheem Valley Manor childhood home, reported Santa's visit was "the absolute highlight of our toddler's day. He talked about it constantly and we watched the video I took three times before bed that night."

In real life, both Sophie and Ryan Aull work at Diaforce and Stone owns Diamond Construction, a residential construction company.

All three might now consider adding the title of "magician" to their resumes; as one social media poster proclaimed, "It was a little magic in a difficult year," while another declared, "And just like that, I believe."

## Family Focus

### Thinking More Positively

#### By Margie Ryerson, MFT

"Happiness depends on your mindset and attitude." ~ Roy T. Bennett, "The Light in the Heart"

Here's to a happier new year in 2021! Trying to find happiness in the midst of turmoil, loss, and worry has tested our coping skills to the limit in 2020. For many, it has been difficult to think very positively and sustain this attitude at times during the past year. But each small step we take can contribute to lifting our spirits, so this column offers a few suggestions toward that end.

First, though, a caveat: If you or anyone in your family suffers from clinical depression or extreme anxiety, you will probably have difficulty controlling sad and negative thoughts. You won't be in a position to think more positively until you have been on a medication regimen and in cognitive behavioral therapy, the recommended treatments for these conditions. It would be detrimental for anyone to expect you to think a certain way until you are physiologically and psychologically ready.

But for those who don't have underlying conditions that interfere, increasing positive thinking is an important step in achieving more happiness and enjoyment in life. We all know people who have naturally opti-

mistic, upbeat natures. But most of us have to strive to achieve this state of mind.

Many families have established the practice of expressing gratitude at the dinner table and at other times. It is so helpful for children to acquire this positive habit at an early age. The hope is that, throughout their lives, they'll have a way to lift themselves up when they may tend to spiral down.

Will, a 30-year-old single sales manager, has been in therapy to work on changing his pessimistic, glass-half-empty orientation that has caused him to be chronically unhappy. And, of course, Will doesn't attract friends or romantic partners very easily, since it's difficult to be around someone who is perpetually negative and cynical. The lack of social companionship feeds into Will's pessimism, and he has been trapped in a cycle of hopelessness. He is already on an anti-depressant that has helped him, and he doesn't want to increase his dosage.

Throughout this pandemic, Will has lived alone and worked from home with little contact with others. He was concerned about being unhappy before the pandemic, even when he was able to be around people at work, go to the gym, and go out and socialize. But now he feels acute loneliness and disconnection from others.

Will is a product of an upbringing where he was encour-

aged to succeed in academics and sports. Growing up, he was happier and more self-confident. All good, except that he didn't develop himself beyond his accomplishments. He didn't need to think much about his personal qualities and strengths. Now that he is just one of many high-performing employees, Will can't rely on his former means of achieving contentment.

During this pandemic and so many other challenges, we have all had to call upon our inner strength while we experience more worry, limitations, and longing for our former lives. We are likely spending more time with ourselves than before, especially those who live alone. It's important to look for ways to be able to boost our own spirits.

In order to turn around negative thinking, which had become habitual in Will's case, it helps to track these thoughts. I asked Will to journal each negative thought about himself that he could. Awareness is key to taking control. Then over time, I asked Will to write a counter to each of these thoughts as he went along. He didn't have to come up with praise for himself, although if genuine, this would have been great. But the idea was to find evidence to reduce the level of negativity. This process of actively documenting self-criticisms can help disrupt automatic thought patterns. And

while making these shifts won't automatically lead to happiness, it will at least set the stage for allowing in some positivity.

For example, when Will told himself that he would never find a girlfriend, he put down that he did have a successful (until the end) long-term relationship in the past – so he must have done something right. When Will told himself that he wasn't as smart as many of his team members, he countered with the fact that he had received a promotion twice in the past four years.

Another helpful exercise is to think of what you would tell a good friend who was relating his or her own self-critical assessments. Would you agree that, yes, your friend should feel bad about himself or herself? Or would you help your friend look for evidence to the contrary? Typically, we can do this easily and naturally for a friend, so why not for ourselves? Is this even fair to have one standard for our friend and another, more exacting one for ourselves?

A cognitive tool that is very helpful in keeping us present (mindful), less anxious, more at peace and therefore happier, is avoiding anticipatory worry. For example, Will made himself very unhappy by projecting into the future how lonely and unfulfilling his life would be, based on his current status. Of course, in reality he has no way

of knowing how his future will look. His worrying only serves to give him a sense of hopelessness, which discourages building his resolve to take positive action. Going forward, we can try to avoid getting caught up in negative "what-ifs" for the future and concentrate instead on making our present better.

We've all been blindsided by circumstances beyond our control this past year. Of course, there are times when we are going to be sad and disheartened or worried or scared, no matter what. We can't always try to think more positively. But it's important that we support ourselves and our loved ones as best we can during these unusual times, and consciously trying to adjust our perspective can help.



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