

The Most Comforting Food

Macaroni And Cheese: Universally Loved And Easy To Make

BY LAUREN CHATTMAN
Newsday
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After a dark and stormy month, we could all use a meal that brightens the kitchen and warms the belly. Something easy to make, universally loved and comforting in the extreme. Yes, it's time to throw cholesterol caution to the wind and cook up some homemade macaroni and cheese.

You say you are attached to the kind from the blue box? Then you will love the real thing. Worried that the from-scratch version is too difficult? Rest assured, it requires the same simple steps as the packaged version — boiling noodles and stirring them together with milk and cheese.

True, the shopping is a little more complicated. You'll have to buy cheese, and lots of it. A creamy, saucy dish requires at least as much cheese as macaroni. That means 12 ounces of cheese for 12 ounces of macaroni in the following recipe. Before you make this substantial investment, make sure the cheese you are buying is the kind that will melt into a smooth and shiny puddle (Cheddar, Monterey Jack, Gruyere and Gouda fall into this category). Avoid cheese that becomes stringy when melted (like mozzarella) or cheese that resists melting at all (feta will behave this way). Choose your macaroni wisely, as well. Small elbows are traditional, but larger tubular shapes, such as penne and rigatoni, are better able to draw cheese in and trap the sauce on their rough surfaces.

On to the cooking: Even cheeses that are predisposed to melt nicely can become grainy and greasy if heated too quickly or for too long. Let your cheese sit on the countertop for 30 minutes so it comes to room temperature before cooking, since refrigerated cheese will require more heat to melt. Shred your cheese (rather than cutting it into cubes or chunks), which also facilitates melting. Once you add it to the pot, cook it over low heat until it is liquefied and piping hot.

There is some debate about how long to boil the macaroni before stirring it together with the cheese. Many cooks call for undercooking, so the pasta won't get mushy as it continues to cook in the sauce. This makes sense if you are going to bake your pasta for 20 minutes or more. But for stovetop macaroni and cheese, which requires just a few minutes of extra cooking time, al dente is the way to go.

I prefer the creamy texture of stovetop macaroni and cheese to the firmer result you get when you bake the dish. But I do like a crunchy topping. The solution: Pour stovetop macaroni and cheese into a baking dish, sprinkle with a combination of Parmesan cheese and bread crumbs, and broil for a minute or two until the surface is golden brown.

Many of us return to classic macaroni and cheese for its comforting familiarity. But for others, variety is the spice of life. If you are one of the latter group, consider the following variations. Stir in add-ons just before transferring to a baking dish and broiling:

- Diced ham and peas
- Fresh corn and minced chipotle chilies
- Bacon, sauteed leeks, and garlic (use Gruyere in place of Cheddar)
- Cooked and chopped lobster meat (use Gruyere in place of Cheddar)
- Blanched cauliflower and Kalamata olives (use Italian fontina in place of Cheddar)
- Diced sauteed pepperoni, diced tomatoes and olives (use provolone in place of Cheddar)

CREAMY MACARONI AND CHEESE

- 2 large eggs
- 1 (12-ounce) can evaporated milk, divided
- 1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard
- 3/4 pound penne or other tubular, ridged pasta

- 1/4 cup (1/2 stick) unsalted butter
- 6 ounces (about 1 1/2 cups) shredded Monterey Jack cheese
- 6 ounces (about 1 1/2 cups) shredded Cheddar cheese
- Salt
- 1/2 ounce (about 1/2 cup) grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/2 cup panko bread crumbs

- 1. Whisk together eggs, 1 cup evaporated milk, cayenne pepper

- and mustard in a small bowl.
- 2. Bring a large saucepan of salted water to boil. Add pasta and cook until just tender. Drain, return to the pot and toss with butter over low heat until butter is melted.
- 3. Stir in egg mixture and Jack cheese until cheese is just melted. Stirring constantly, add remaining evaporated milk and Cheddar cheese. Continue to stir

- until cheese is melted and sauce is slightly thickened and piping hot, 5 to 7 minutes. Season with salt.
- 4. Preheat broiler. Scrape macaroni into an 8-inch-square broiler-safe baking dish. Sprinkle with Parmesan and then bread crumbs. Broil until topping is browned. Serve immediately. Makes 4 to 6 servings.



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Cooked on the stovetop and browned under the broiler, this macaroni and cheese is both creamy and crispy.

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