

# You Can Call It 'Vel-Cheater'

## Process Your Own 'American' Cheese At Home

BY NOELLE CARTER

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You could say it started with the "Cheese-pocalypse" — you know, all those stories about a Velveeta shortage that have had everyone in a tizzy!

But there's no need to worry. You can make it yourself — a homemade "food prepper" version of liquid gold. Just in case.

Before you laugh, hear me out. Processed cheese, like those individually wrapped singles, often gets a bad rap, but just try getting that perfect ooze and silky texture from any other cheese when you melt it. Real cheese tends to separate when heated, the proteins clumping together while fats and moisture ooze out in the most unattractive way.

Processed cheese can take the heat and keep it together, with a glossy sheen to boot.

Even the molecular gastronomers are fans. Nathan Myhrvold's "Modernist Cuisine at Home" contains a number of processed cheese variations, and Heston Blumenthal has a rather intense recipe to go with his reinvented hamburger.

I wanted an easy method I could make at home, using ingredients I could find at the supermarket.

I tried Myhrvold's and Blumenthal's methods, along with a number of others, and then went off and experimented some more. It took a little while — actually, more than 20 trials and at least 10 pounds of cheese — before I found something I liked.

Let's start with the cheese. Processed cheese has traditionally consisted of a blend of cheeses, typically Colby and cheddar. For a home version, a mild cheddar is perfect for flavor (it's not overly intense).

In order to get the right "ooze" when the cheese is melted, you need to add a liquid. I tried recipes that called for beer, milk, water and even infused sherry. I went with a blend of water and dry white wine. The wine not only gives the cheese a nice tang, it also helps to hold the cheese together as it melts, as when making a classic fondue.

But wine alone is not enough. Myhrvold and Blumenthal both use sodium citrate (derived from citrus, it's also used in a number of commercial processed cheeses) as an

emulsifier. Sodium citrate isn't that hard to find online, but you won't find it at the local market.

To help hold the liquid and cheese together, I added dehydrated milk and tapioca starch. I tested a number of thickeners, including the gelatin preferred by America's Test Kitchen, but I liked the texture of tapioca, and, unlike gelatin, tapioca keeps the cheese vegetarian.

Finally, I added a little butter for richness and moisture, and a touch of salt to bump up the flavors.

To make the cheese, finely grate the cheddar and pulse it in a food processor along with the milk powder, tapioca starch and salt, and bring the water, wine and butter to a boil in a small saucepan. With the motor running, slowly drizzle the liquids onto the cheese to melt and combine. Finally, spoon the cheese into a plastic wrap-lined ramekin (you could use a square mold for a more supermarket look, but I love the idea of a wheel of cheese), and then chill it in the refrigerator for a few hours to firm up.

The results? Amazing cheese that melts

just right, using only a handful of ingredients.

After mild cheddar, I tried "processing" other cheeses with varying degrees of success. I found smoked fresh Gouda makes a great processed cheese, as does the sharp cheddar from Tillamook. But when I tried sharp cheddar from another producer, it simply didn't work. Different cheeses vary in consistency, and the recipe will need to be tweaked.

Still, that processed Gouda made an excellent mac 'n' cheese. Most recipes call for melting the cheese in a roux-based sauce; while that helps keep the cheese from separating as it cooks, the flour also clouds the pure cheese flavor. Because I didn't need to add the roux, the cheese flavor was richer, more pronounced.

Cheese-pocalypse averted, I'll be using the processed mild cheddar in my queso dip for the game on Sunday. I can't say I'll never buy processed cheese again, but there's nothing like being able to make and flavor it myself.

Best of all? I know exactly what went into it.



ANNE CUSACK/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT

Process your own American cheese at home. The cheese will keep for up to 1 month, covered and refrigerated.

## Homemade Processed Cheese

Total time: 20 minutes, plus chilling time. Makes about 13 ounces

8 ounces solid mild cheddar (see note below)  
1/4 cup nonfat milk powder  
2 tablespoons tapioca flour or starch  
3/8 teaspoon salt, or to taste  
2 tablespoons butter  
1/4 cup dry white wine  
1/4 cup water

1. Line a 12-ounce ramekin or similar-sized small loaf pan or mold with plastic wrap.
2. Very finely grate the cheese and place it in a food processor. Add the milk powder, tapioca flour and salt, and pulse to thoroughly combine.
3. In a small saucepan, combine the butter, wine and water. Cover and quickly bring to a boil over high heat, 1 to 2 minutes.
4. Immediately remove from heat and, with the processor running, slowly pour the hot liquid in with the cheese. Continue processing until the cheese is fully melted and all of the ingredients are incorporated, scraping the bowl once or twice in between processing.
5. Spoon the cheese into the prepared loaf pan. Smooth

the top and cover with plastic wrap.

6. Refrigerate the cheese until fully set and firm enough to slice, preferably several hours and up to overnight. The cheese will keep for up to 1 month, covered and refrigerated.

### EACH OUNCE

Calories: 98  
Protein: 5 grams  
Carbohydrates: 2 grams  
Fiber: 0  
Fat: 8 grams  
Saturated fat: 5 grams  
Cholesterol: 23 mg  
Sugar: 1 gram  
Sodium: 183 mg

NOTE: You can also try substituting a similar fresh semi-firm cheese for the cheddar, such as Gouda (to use in the mac 'n' cheese recipe). Additional flavorings and spices, such as chili powder, chopped chives or chiles, can be added as desired at the end of Step 4. The recipe calls for solid cheese to be grated. Pre-grated cheeses are often coated with starch to keep them from clumping; this added starch can negatively affect the final texture of the processed cheese in this recipe.

## Chile Con Queso

50 minutes. Serves 8 to 10

3 jalapenos, or to taste  
2 tablespoons oil  
1/2 onion, chopped  
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped  
1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, preferably fire-roasted  
1 teaspoon ground cumin  
1/3 cup beer, preferably pale lager  
2 batches (26 ounces) homemade processed cheese, cut into roughly 1-inch cubes  
1/2 to 1 cup milk, or as desired  
Salt

1. Roast the jalapenos: Place the chiles on a rack set over a gas stove-top burner heated over high heat. Roast until the skin on all sides of each chile is charred, about 5 minutes, turning frequently. (If you have an electric or ceramic stove top, roast the chiles in the oven using the broiler setting until charred on all sides.) Wrap each pepper in plastic wrap and set aside until the peppers are cool enough to handle. Rub the plastic wrap against the skin to loosen and remove it. Do not rinse the peppers to remove the skin, as rinsing will remove flavor. Stem and seed each pepper, then dice the peppers into roughly one-fourth-inch pieces. Set aside.

2. In a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring frequently, until the onion is softened and lightly browned, 12 to 15 minutes. Stir in the garlic, then add the diced tomatoes and jalapenos. Cook until most of the liquid is evaporated, about 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Stir in the cumin.

3. Stir in the beer, scraping any flavorings from the base of the pan, then reduce the heat to medium-low and begin to stir in the cheese, a few cubes at a time. Continue to add more cubes as the cheese melts, stirring constantly.

4. Stir in one-half cup milk when most of the cheese has been added, then continue to stir until all of the cheese is melted to form the queso. Adjust the consistency of the queso with additional milk as desired. Taste and adjust the seasoning with three-fourths teaspoon salt, or as desired. This makes about 6 cups queso.

### EACH OF 10 SERVINGS

Calories: 310  
Protein: 14 grams  
Carbohydrates: 10 grams  
Fiber: 1 gram  
Fat: 23 grams  
Saturated fat: 13 grams  
Cholesterol: 62 mg  
Sugar: 5 grams  
Sodium: 753 mg



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Here, chile con queso made with homemade American cheese.

## Smoked Gouda Mac 'N' Cheese

Total Time: 1 hour. Serves 4 to 6



ANNE CUSACK/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT

Add cider to this smoked Gouda macaroni and cheese dish.

1/2 pound dry macaroni or similar pasta  
5 tablespoons butter, divided  
1/2 chopped onion  
3/4 cup hard cider  
1 batch (13 ounces) homemade American cheese, made using smoked Gouda, cut into roughly 1-inch cubes  
1/4 cup milk  
3/4 teaspoon salt, more to taste  
Freshly ground pepper  
2/3 cup panko bread crumbs  
1/4 cup finely grated smoked fresh Gouda cheese

1. Boil the pasta to al dente according to the instructions on the packaging. Drain the pasta well and spread it out on a rimmed baking sheet, very lightly oiling the pasta to keep it from sticking. Set aside and heat the oven to 375°F.

2. In a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan, melt 2 tablespoons butter over medium-high heat. Stir in the chopped onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is softened and lightly browned, 10 to 15 minutes.

3. Stir in the hard cider, scraping to dislodge any flavorings from the base of the pan. Bring the cider to a simmer.

4. Add the cheese, a few cubes at a time, stirring to melt. When the cheese is mostly melted, stir in the milk. Once all of the cheese is melted and the ingredients are thoroughly incorporated to form a sauce, stir in the cooked pasta. Season with the salt and several grinds of black pepper, or to taste.

5. Spoon the pasta and sauce into a 1 1/2- to 2-quart gratin dish.

6. To make the topping, melt the remaining 3 tablespoons butter, then stir in the bread crumbs and grated Gouda cheese until evenly combined, with the bread crumbs lightly coated with butter. Taste and add a pinch of salt, or as desired. Sprinkle the topping over the pasta.

7. Bake the macaroni until the sauce is bubbly along the edges and the topping is crisp and a light golden color, 12 to 15 minutes. Remove from heat and cool slightly before serving.

### EACH OF 6 SERVINGS

Calories 491  
Protein 18 grams  
Carbohydrates 41 grams  
Fiber 2 grams  
Fat 26 grams  
Saturated fat 16 grams  
Cholesterol 86 mg  
Sugar 4 grams  
Sodium 820 mg

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