

Ultimate – AWARD WINNING, MAC-N-CHEESE

Serves 8-10



If there's a trick to this Mac & Cheese, besides the emphasis on top-notch ingredients, it's the proportion of the sauce to the pasta. Way more than most recipes call for, which prevents the pasta from absorbing all of it and becoming dry and clumpy while baking.

Ingredients:

Pasta

12 ounces, short, dried, tubular pasta, such as garganelli, maccheroni, mostaccioli, penne, tortiglione, or ziti (about 2 pounds cooked)
2 teaspoons sea salt

Breadcrumbs Topping

6 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
2 cups stale white bread crumbs, coarsely crumbled
2 clove garlic, pressed or minced

Cheeses (15-16 ounces or about 5 cups total cheese)

6 ounces (2 cups) grated, aged cheddar cheese
3 ounces (1 cup) grated Swiss Emmentaler or Gruyere
3 ounces (1 cup) grated, mild-flavored melting cheese, such as Jack or Asadero
3 ounces (1 cup) grated Italian Pecorino Romano (aged at least 9 months)
optional: 2-4 tablespoons crumbled blue cheese (1 ounce)

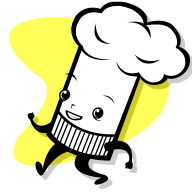
Béchamel Sauce

2 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 cups minced yellow onion (8 ounces or about 1 large onion)
2 cloves garlic, peeled, and minced or pressed
½ cup all-purpose flour
4 cups milk (or a mixture of half milk and half cream or sour cream, or a mixture of half cream and half chicken stock)
sea salt, to taste
freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Optional Extras (choose one or more)

½ cup, stemmed, seeded, diced jalapeno chilies (add while the onions are cooking)
½ cup cooked, crumbled applewood smoked bacon (add when mixing the sauce with the pasta)
1 cup roasted, peeled, seeded, diced poblano chile (add when mixing the sauce with the pasta)
½ cup roasted, peeled, seeded, diced jalapeno chile (add when mixing the sauce with the pasta)
2 cups sautéed, chopped shitake mushrooms (add when mixing the sauce with the pasta)

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Directions:

Prepare the baking dish

1. Coat a 6-cup capacity, ovenproof casserole with vegetable spray or a dab of butter. Reserve.

Make the breadcrumb topping

1. In a small mixing bowl, combine the melted butter, bread crumbs, and garlic. Reserve.

Cook the pasta

1. Bring a large pot of water to a rapid boil, add 2 teaspoons of salt, return to a boil, and add the pasta.
2. Cook until just barely tender with a bit of chewiness remaining.
3. Remove the pasta pot from the stove and carefully pour the water and pasta into a large colander to drain. Run cold water over the pasta to cool it to room temperature. Add pasta to a large mixing bowl.
4. Toss the pasta in the bowl with all of the cheeses and reserve.

Make the béchamel sauce

1. In a medium saucepan, melt the butter, add the onions, and slowly cook until onions are softened but not browned. Add the garlic and stir to combine.
2. Stir in the flour, and cook without browning for two minutes.
3. Slowly pour in the milk and whisk constantly while bringing the sauce to a simmer. Simmer, whisking continuously, for 2 minutes.
4. Pour the sauce over the pasta and cheeses in the bowl. With a large spatula, fold to combine.
5. Spoon into the prepared casserole, mounding slightly at the center.
6. Sprinkle on the breadcrumb topping.
7. Bake at 350° for 30-40 minutes until heated through and bubbling. Broil for a minute or two to finish browning the top.

