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Macaroni and Cheese “Broccolissimo”

Serves 4

This dish is as much about the broccoli as it is about the macaroni. They are held together with lots of creamy béchamel, and baked into a melty, pungent, delectable mess. Though I like it with Sprinz, a dry Jack, pecorino, or aged Asiago would be good here. Or use a combination of two cheeses, one mild, such as Jack, and one strong, such as pecorino.

For a refreshing and simple salad, serve slices of ripe tomatoes topped with leaves of Asian or anise basil. Either will push the edge of tomato and basil that little intriguing bit further.

1 to 2 heads broccoli, stems cut into bit-size pieces, tops cut into small, bite-size florets
8 ounces small shell pasta
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 tablespoons flour
2 cups hot, but not boiling, milk (low fat is fine)
Salt to taste
Dash of cayenne pepper
A grating of fresh nutmeg
10 ounces Sprinz or Asiago, shredded (or combination of 8 ounces Appenzeller, Jack or a similar tasty firm cheese, shredded, plus 2 ounces pecorino, aged Asiago, or Parmesan, grated)

Blanch the broccoli in a small amount of rapidly boiling salted water or steam them. Drain and set aside.

Cook the pasta in a large pot of rapidly boiling salted water until almost al dente, then drain and set aside.

In a heavy nonstick saucepan, melt the butter over medium low heat, then sprinkle in the flour. Cook for a minute or so to get rid of the raw taste of the flour. Remove from the heat and add the milk all at once, stirring well with a wooden spoon. Return to the stove and cook, stirring, over medium-high heat until the sauce thickens. If there are any lumps, whisk them away with a wire whisk. Season with the salt, cayenne, and nutmeg. Set aside a few tablespoons of the cheese for the top of the casserole, and stir the rest into the sauce.

Spoon a few tablespoons of the sauce on the bottom of a large shallow baking dish, then in layers, add the pasta, broccoli, and the remaining sauce. Sprinkle the reserved cheese over the top.

Bake until the top is bubbling and hot, and the cheese melty and browning in spots, about 20 minutes. Serve immediately.