

Spicy Mac'n Cheese

Ingredients:

Makes about 8 hearty main dish servings.

The Pasta:

1 pound (16 oz.) pasta
About 4 quarts of water
Salt for pasta water

The Sauce:

3 jalapeño peppers, seeded, finely diced
1 shallot, finely minced
6 tablespoons butter
6 tablespoons flour
3 cups whole milk
1 teaspoon Tabasco sauce
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
1 cup grated Pepper Jack cheese (about 4 oz.)
1 cup grated Sharp Cheddar cheese (about 4 oz.)
1 cup grated Parmesan cheese (about 4 oz.)
1 cup grated Gruyere cheese (about 4 oz.)

The Topping: (for the baked version)

2 tablespoons butter, melted
1/2 cup Panko bread crumbs

Directions:

1. SEED and DICE the jalapeño peppers by trimming off the tops and cutting each in half lengthwise. With a small spoon scrape away the seeds and inner membranes. (We like to use a small appetizer spoon or a grapefruit spoon for this task -- either works very well.) Slice the halves lengthwise into strips, then crosswise into a dice.
2. MINCE the shallot by first peeling away the papery skin and separating the bulb into its natural pieces. Slice the shallot lengthwise, then cutting crosswise, into a fine dice.
3. GRATE the cheeses with a coarse grater. Set aside.
4. PREPARE the pasta by bringing approximately 4 quarts of water to a rolling boil. Add 1 tablespoon salt to the boiling water. Add the dried pasta and cook until just tender, or *al dente*. Drain in a colander. Once drained, the pasta may be placed back into the empty cooking pot and covered with the lid to keep warm until ready to be mixed with the sauce.

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5. SAUTÉ the diced peppers and shallot in 6 tablespoons of melted butter in a 3 quart saucepan over medium heat. Stirring occasionally, cook until the shallot has become soft and translucent, about 5-6 minutes.

6. ADD the flour to the melted butter and softened aromatics. With a whisk, stir the butter and flour together until a rather thick paste forms – the ROUX. This roux (pronounced “roo,” rhymes with “boo,”) forms the basis of the mac ‘n cheese. Allow the roux to cook for 2-3 minutes stirring often. It may appear that not much is happening, but a lot is going on in these few minutes. The flour is changing character and taste, while the butter browns slightly adding even more flavor.

7. POUR 1/2 cup of milk into the roux and whisk well. The mixture will thicken quickly. Once the initial dose of milk has been combined thoroughly continue adding the milk in half-cup increments whisking well after each addition. This incremental addition of milk and thorough whisking will ensure a smooth sauce at the end.

8. SEASON the sauce with the Tabasco sauce (or your favorite hot sauce), salt, and pepper. Taste and adjust the seasonings accordingly. (The cheeses, soon to be added, will add another dose of salt, so go easy at this stage.)

FINISH the Mac ‘n Cheese in one of two ways:

STOVETOP VERSION:

9. REMOVE the sauce from the heat source and stir in the grated cheeses. (It may be easier to do this in two additions.). Stir to combine the sauce and cheese, but don't worry about it becoming smooth – lumpy is ok at this stage.

10. Pour the sauce over the waiting cooked pasta. Stir to combine, and serve immediately.

BAKED VERSION:

9. PREPARE a 3-4 quart baking dish by coating the interior with a thin film of olive oil.

10. Fill the baking dish with one-third of the pasta, followed by one-third of the sauce and one-third of the cheese. REPEAT the sequence with the remaining ingredients.

11. POUR the remaining 2 tablespoons of melted butter over the Panko bread crumbs in a separate small bowl and toss to mix. SPRINKLE over the top of the filled baking dish.

12. Bake in a 350°F oven for 20-25 minutes or until the top is nicely golden in color and the sauce bubbling around the pasta. Serve immediately.