

Baked Mac and Cheese

Ingredients:

- 8-9 cups of cooked elbow macaroni or your favorite short shaped pasta
- ½ cup of butter (preferably unsalted), plus 1 tablespoon of butter to grease dish
- 4-6 tablespoons of all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ -2 cups of half and half or whole milk
- Seasoning:
 - Onion powder
 - Garlic powder
 - Paprika
 - Black ground pepper
- 2 tablespoons of sour cream or cream cheese (optional)
- 3-4 cups of shredded cheeses for sauce (Must have: Sharp or White Cheddar, Monterey or Colby Jack; Optional: Smoked Gouda or Gruyere), plus 2 cups for middle layer and topping
- 1-1 ½ cups of mozzarella cheese for middle layer and topping

Preparation & Cooking:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees

*Tip #1: be sure to over salt boiling water before adding uncooked pasta. This will be your only opportunity to salt your pasta.

*Tip#2: avoid using the pre-shredded bag of cheese since some brands tend to be drier and don't melt properly. Opt to buy blocks of cheeses and shred it yourself, if you are able to.

Butter casserole dish or wide cast iron skillet

In large pot, melt butter over medium heat. Do not let butter burn, so adjust heat as necessary. Add first 4 tablespoons of flour and stir with wooden spoon or fork. Add additional flour if needed. Stir consistently in one direction. You want to create a light golden roux (about 3-5) minutes.

Add half and half or whole milk, one cup at a time. This is where I switch to a whisk to help incorporate the liquid and the roux. Continue to whisk and add more liquid. Allow to come to a light boil and continue to whisk. You will notice the liquid thickening. If it's too stiff, add more liquid.

Turn your heat down low to prevent the mixture from burning on the bottom. Add all seasonings and sour cream and stir. Start adding about two cups of your shredded cheeses to the mixture and stir. Add the remaining cheese for sauce and stir until melted and mixture has transformed into a cheese sauce. It is safe to taste the sauce as you're adding your cheeses to see if you would like to add more seasoning, more cheese or even milk. The goal is to make it flavorful and cheesy, but adjust ingredients according to what you like.

Transfer cooked pasta to cheese sauce and stir. Add half of cheesy pasta to buttered baking dish or skillet. Top with half of the remaining cheeses and mozzarella. Pour remaining pasta on top and sprinkle the rest of the cheeses on top.

Bake until bubbly and golden brown, approximately 30 minutes depending on oven and size of casserole dish or skillet. Serve while hot and creamy!