

Basic Mac and Cheese – Comfort du Jour

There are a million “best ever” mac and cheese recipes out there, but taste is subjective so I’m not going to make that claim here. It really is all about the cheese sauce, and your technique can make or break your dish. I’ll admit that I hardly ever make mac and cheese the same way twice. I change up the type of pasta depending on what’s in the pantry, and I use whatever leftover bits and pieces of cheese we have in the deli drawer at the time. But the main formula is the same and each step has a purpose. This is my very “basic” mac and cheese recipe. Use your own kitchen instincts and change it up however you like!

INGREDIENTS

3 Tbsp. butter (salted or unsalted)
½ cup finely chopped onion (I like sweet, but use Spanish, shallots, white, red or whatever)
3 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
2 cups whole milk* (see notes)
About 8 oz. real American cheese*
2 packed cups good melting cheese, freshly shredded*
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
¼ tsp. white pepper
¼ tsp. dry mustard powder
12 oz. box good quality pasta*

*NOTES

Feel free to substitute 2% or skim milk if you must, but expect the sauce to be less creamy.

I like to start with American cheese, which is processed with salts and enzymes for super melting ability. If you are averse to the idea of American cheese (first of all, why? And [read this](#)), or if you just don’t have any, you may substitute a lesser amount of real cream cheese, which also has some stabilizers for a creamier sauce, but it’s bland so you’ll need to season it more.

The rest of the cheese is up for grabs, but go with something that melts well: medium to sharp cheddar, Monterey jack, Havarti, Gouda, fontina, gruyere or even a bit of brie (without the rind) are delicious. Avoid super-stretchy cheeses such as mozzarella or Swiss and hard or crumbly cheeses such as feta, parmesan and manchego. Also, freshly shredded cheese is best. Pre-packaged shreds are coated with modified starch substance that keeps the cheese from clumping in the bag. Guess what else it does? It prevents even melting.

For the pasta, consider mainly shape and texture, but if you’re looking to step up your game, also peek at the ingredients. Pasta made with “durum” or “semolina” flour (same thing, two names) provides a richer, deeper flavor than “enriched wheat” flour. If you like whole grain, that’s fine, too. Look for shapes with curves, nooks and crannies to grab onto your creamy cheese sauce. Elbows are classic, but rotini, fusilli, orecchiette, ditalini, and shells are all going to work well. Look for pasta labeled as “bronze cut,” which has a rougher texture, ensuring even greater hold on the cheese sauce.

INSTRUCTIONS

Over medium low heat, melt butter in your heavy-bottomed saucepan and add onions, simmering very slowly until they are soft and translucent. Do not rush this step. You don't want the onions to brown, only to soften. This step should take about 6 to 8 minutes. Get the rest of your ingredients lined up, because it will go quickly from here.

When onions are soft, season with salt and pepper then sprinkle flour over them and stir to coat well. Increase the heat to medium and cook until bubbly and just turning golden.

Add milk slowly but all at once, whisking constantly to create a smooth mixture. Add dry mustard and white pepper and continue to cook over medium heat until mixture is just simmering and slightly thickened. Add cubes of American cheese and whisk until melted and uniform consistency.

Add shredded cheese, one cup at a time, and whisk after each addition until smooth. Adjust salt and pepper to taste, remove from heat. At this point, you have a lovely creamy cheese sauce.

Want to take it up a notch to *pure decadence*? Use an immersion blender to whip the sauce into a completely smooth and silky consistency.