

# Mac & Pimiento Cheese – Comfort du Jour

Show up at any family reunion or church potluck in the South, and you can bet your sweet tea you'll find at least three kinds of mac and cheese on the table, plus a couple of pimiento cheese appetizers (probably layered thinly in little white bread finger sandwiches). I *love* doing mashups of classic foods, and so it seemed obvious to me that pimiento cheese should be paired with mac and cheese. It's a beautiful, diet-be-danged casserole collision, if I do say so myself.

## INGREDIENTS

### CHEESE SAUCE

1/2 medium onion, diced small  
4 Tbsp. salted butter  
4 Tbsp. all-purpose flour  
2 cups whole milk  
6 oz. cream cheese, softened to room temp\*  
8 oz. brick sharp cheddar, shredded\* (see notes)  
About half of a 7 oz. jar of pimientos or roasted red peppers, drained and chopped

### PIMIENTO CHEESE DOLLOPS

2 oz. cream cheese, softened to room temp  
1/4 cup mayonnaise  
A few shakes sweet paprika  
The other half of the jar of pimientos or roasted red peppers, drained and chopped  
4 oz. sharp cheddar, shredded

### FOR ASSEMBLING THE CASSEROLE

Most of a 1 lb. package of macaroni or other pasta\*  
1/4 cup panko bread crumbs  
1 Tbsp. salted butter, melted  
1/4 cup **parm-romano blend** (ours were tossed with "chili onion crunch" from Trader Joe's)

### \*NOTES

I recommend regular, full-fat cream cheese for this recipe. I have found that the light version does not maintain the creamy texture in a heated sauce. For the complete recipe, I used an entire 8 oz. brick of cream cheese, but it was divided between the cheese sauce and the pimiento cheese mixture.

Two kinds of cheddar went into my mac and pimiento cheese, because we like spicy stuff at our house. I used an entire 8 oz. brick of sharp cheddar and half of an 8 oz. brick of habanero cheddar. Mix and match to your liking, but reserve about a cup of shredded cheese for the pimiento cheese mixture.

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Pimientos are a variety of pepper, and though it is easy to find jars of pimientos at the market, I used a large jar of roasted red peppers because that is what I had in the cabinet. You might even choose to roast fresh peppers yourself—that's what I usually do when I make my own version of pimiento cheese. If you choose jarred peppers or pimientos, be sure to drain them well and use a paper towel to wick away excess moisture.

I held back about 1/4 of the box of pasta because I wanted the mac and cheese to be extra “saucy.” Classic elbow macaroni works great in a mac and cheese, and I always encourage choosing pasta that is labeled “bronze die cut,” because the surface of the pasta is rougher and holds a cheese sauce extremely well. Cook your pasta just barely to the “al dente” stage, or a bit underdone than you would prefer. When you bake the mac and cheese, it will soften further from the heat and the cheese sauce.

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Make the béchamel: melt butter in a heavy-bottomed saucepan. Saute the onions until soft. Sprinkle in the flour and stir to combine. Cook until flour is absorbed and bubbly. Add milk and whisk until smooth.
2. Add the first amount of cream cheese to the béchamel and whisk until smooth and creamy. Add the shredded cheddar, a handful at a time, and whisk until smooth. Use immersion blender (optional) to amplify the creamy texture of the cheese sauce.
3. Pat dry the first amount of pimientos or roasted red peppers, and stir them into the cheese sauce.
4. Preheat the oven to 350° F, with oven rack in center position. Blend together the panko crumbs, melted butter and parm-romano blend, and set it aside for now.
5. Cook the elbow macaroni or pasta according to package instructions until just al dente. Slightly undercooked is better than overcooked, as the pasta will absorb moisture from the cheese sauce during baking. Drain the pasta and cool slightly.
6. Combine the remaining cream cheese and mayo, whisking as needed to create a smooth-textured spread. Add the remaining pimientos (pat them dry first), paprika and remaining shredded cheddar.
7. Fold the cooked pasta into the cheese sauce and layer about half of it into a glass 8 x 8 inch casserole. Spoon dollops of pimiento cheese mixture randomly over the mac and cheese, then layer on the rest of the pasta mixture. Spoon remaining pimiento cheese over the surface of the mac and cheese, but do not spread it.
8. Bake the mac and cheese, uncovered, for about 30 minutes. Remove from oven and sprinkle the cheesy panko crumbs all over the top of the mac and cheese. Slide it back into the oven for 15 more minutes, or until the panko crumbs are browned and crispy and the cheesy sauce is bubbling up from every corner of the dish. Cool 5 to 10 minutes before serving. The waiting will feel like torture, but it will help the mac and cheese set up.