

Savory Pumpkin Mac and Cheese – Comfort du Jour

The color is vibrant and autumn-like, and the aroma of the sage is, well, intoxicating. The mac and cheese is easy to make, and you can skip the step of baking it, if you prefer a quicker stovetop version. This recipe is a great way to enjoy the health benefits of pumpkin, but without all the sugar and spice that seems to be everywhere.

INGREDIENTS

4 Tbsp. wild mushroom and sage olive oil* (see notes)
1/2 medium onion, chopped
3 Tbsp. salted butter
4 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
2 cups whole milk
8 oz. smoked gouda (processed)*, shredded
8 oz. sharp cheddar, shredded
1/2 cup pumpkin puree (not pie filling!)
5 or 6 cremini mushrooms, cleaned and trimmed
Small handful fresh sage leaves, finely minced
1 lb. box firm pasta shape, such as casarecce, rotini or farfalle (bow ties)

TOPPING (FOR BAKED VERSION)

2 Tbsp. melted butter or olive oil
1/4 cup panko bread crumbs
1/4 cup [parm-romano blend](#)* (optional, see notes)

*NOTES

The wild mushroom and sage-infused olive oil is available at specialty oil and vinegar shops. If you cannot get your hands on it, use any favorite olive oil or substitute butter.

The smoked gouda I used for this recipe was technically a “processed” cheese, similar to American in texture. In most of my cheese sauces, I use a processed cheese in the base because it provides a creamier texture. If you prefer, use regular cheese and expect a slightly less silky sauce.

Here’s something interesting I’ve learned recently in my research and development of “meatless” dishes: there is no such thing as vegetarian parmesan. According to [this article](#) and many others I’ve found online, the process for making certain cheeses (including parmesan and pecorino-romano) requires the use of animal rennet, and there is apparently no suitable substitute. Rennet is an enzyme found in the digestive system of animals, and it cannot be extracted from them while they are living. If you adhere to a vegetarian diet for reasons of animal welfare, omit my parm-romano blend from any of my otherwise “meatless” recipes, and always read labels on the cheeses you buy, just to be sure.

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INSTRUCTIONS

1. Heat 2 Tbsp. of the olive oil over medium heat in a heavy-bottomed pot. Sauté the onions until soft, then transfer most of them to a separate bowl.
2. Add butter to the pot until melted. Add the flour and whisk until the flour is absorbed and appears bubbly. Add the milk all at once, cooking and whisking continuously until the mixture is smooth and thickened, which could be 8 to 12 minutes. Add shredded gouda and stir or whisk until melted and creamy. Repeat with shredded cheddar. Stir in pumpkin puree until evenly blended.
3. For the creamiest sauce, process with an immersion blender for about one minute. This step is optional, but I am sold on this technique, as my sauces turn out as smooth as velvet.
4. Prepare the pasta to the al-dente stage, and proceed with the next step while it is cooking.
5. In a separate skillet, heat remaining 2 Tbsp. olive oil over medium heat. Brown the mushroom slices, working in batches if necessary to avoid crowding. Add the sautéed onions to heat through and sprinkle in the rosemary.
6. Drain the pasta and add it to the cheese sauce, stirring until creamy. I generally add the pasta half at a time, to ensure that I have enough sauce. Fold in the mushroom-onion mixture. If you're planning to bake the mac and cheese, transfer it to a 2 qt. baking dish and preheat the oven to 350° F.
7. Melt 2 Tbsp. butter in the skillet used for the mushrooms. I had two extra mushrooms, which I chopped into fine bits and sautéed briefly. Toss panko crumbs in the butter mixture and sprinkle it over the mac and cheese before baking.
8. Bake for 40 to 45 minutes, until crumb topping is slightly crunchy and cheese is bubbling up around all the edges. Cool 10 minutes before serving.