Cooking Corner: Improving on a classic

by Lori Weisberg

Who among us hasn't reveled in the guilty pleasure of digging into a generous helping of macaroni and cheese? We're talking about the real, homemade kind where the pasta is bathed in a rich, custardy sauce loaded with robust cheddar and crowned with a crusty golden topping.

MAC APPLICATIONS - Cookbook authors and chefs keep trying to improve on the classic macaroni and cheese. CNS Photo by K.C. Alfred. SAY CHEESE - A tasting panel sampled five versions of macaroni and cheese and ranked them on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being best: 1. (More Than) Fond o' Macaroni and Cheese (From Jeanene Perry, winner of Taste Artisan Cheese Shop's recipe contest) -- Rating: 9 2. Creamy Macaroni and Cheese (From The New York Times) -- Rating: 8 3. Grown-Up Mac and Cheese (From Ina Garten) -- Rating: 7.5 4. Martha Stewart's Macaroni and Cheese (From Martha Stewart Living) -- Rating: 5.5 5. Stovetop Macaroni and Cheese (From Cook's Illustrated) -- Rating: 4 CNS Photos by K.C. Alfred. No cheese powder here.

Mac 'n' cheese is a perennial comfort-food favorite, yet over the years, cookbook authors, chefs and cooking competitions have tried their best to improve on the classic recipe.

Bechamel sauce or no white sauce? Upscale add-ins such as truffle oil and lobster, perhaps, or a more down-home version with a bit of kielbasa sausage? Tired of cheddar? There's always gorgonzola, fontina, Taleggio and brie to choose from.

While macaroni purists would argue there's no point tampering with a good thing, other cooks insist just as forcefully that there are artful, seductive ways to update an old-fashioned favorite.

"Everyone had macaroni and cheese when they were a kid, but our tastes have progressed," says Ina Garten, cookbook author and host of Food Network's "The Barefoot Contessa.

"We liked it because it was bland, and now it's not that interesting, so we're taking the same kind of texture and making it a grown-up dish. And it's a great dish for parties: Add cheddar and Gruyere to one, and add bacon and blue cheese to the other. You want it to be anything but the stuff in the box."

Christopher Kimball, host of the PBS show "America's Test Kitchen," aligns himself with the traditionalist camp, insisting that mac 'n' cheese was meant to be just that.

"Don't mess with macaroni and cheese; don't put pesto in it," said Kimball, editor of Cook's Illustrated and Cook's Country magazines. "There are certain recipes with a great combination of ingredients, and there's no reason to muck it up. It's like having a perfect painting, and then you keep on painting it."

TASTE TEST

In our quest to find that perfect recipe that embodies what we like best about pasta married with cheese, we chose five versions for an in-house tasting. We assembled a panel of seven tasters to sample recipes that were different enough from one another to provide a credible test.

Some recipes were more traditional, while others incorporated flavorings not typically associated with macaroni and cheese.

In the end, while the most traditional version fared well in our tasting, it was not the favorite. The one that enchanted us most was a decadently rich concoction that relies on heavy cream, a touch of brandy and a melange of three European cheeses to give it a complex, soul-satisfying taste.

Its creator beat out such nationally notable sources as Martha Stewart, The New York Times and Cook's Illustrated.

The winner of a macaroni and cheese contest sponsored by the Taste Artisan Cheese Shop in San Diego, our favorite was inspired by creator Jeanene Perry's love of fondue. While clearly cheesy, the dish wasn't overly so. It made use of three cheeses - Gruyere, Comte and Petit Basque - that were not overpowering and complemented each other well.

(More Than) Fond o' Macaroni and Cheese, we agreed, was the most grown-up, elegant version, with a complexity of flavors that would appeal to most people. Collectively we scored it a 9 on a scale of 1 to 10.

"Very sophisticated and very satisfying," said one of our tasters. "A great entertaining dish that combines comfort with 'Wow!' "

Ina Garten's recipe, which she dubs Grown Up Mac and Cheese, pleased more of our tasters, especially those who liked the pungency that blue cheese brought to this dish. Others, however, thought its presence overpowered the other ingredients, even the crumbled bacon.

"Save this for a night when you throw caution to the wind," advised one panelist. "Use blue cheese with a light hand because it is so strongly flavored." Our panel gave the dish a score of 7.5.

The most conventional of our recipes, The New York Times' Creamy Macaroni and Cheese, should please anyone who prefers a back-to-basics preparation. It's extraordinarily cheesy, redolent of sharp cheddar, which forms a golden orange crust on the casserole.

It came in second in our tasting with an average score of 8.

While not as creamy as some of the other recipes, it wasn't dry either. However, some felt it was a little oily, probably because the recipe calls for so much cheese, plus a tablespoon of butter on top.

This dish was clearly the least labor-intensive of the five, largely because the elbow macaroni does not have to be cooked first. The liquid from the milk helps soften the pasta during the baking process.

And we're all for anything that gets our mac 'n' cheese to the table as quickly as possible.

(MORE THAN) FOND O' MACARONI AND CHEESE

4 tablespoons butter, plus more for buttering baking dish

Plain dry bread crumbs

2 large or 3 small shallots, minced (about 1/3 cup)

1/4 teaspoon white pepper

Pinch salt

3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 1/2 teaspoons dry mustard

2 cups whole milk

1/2 cup heavy cream

3 tablespoons brandy

Pinch nutmeg

1 egg, beaten

6 ounces grated Gruyere cheese (divided use)

3 ounces grated Comte cheese (see note)

3 ounces Petit Basque cheese (see note)

Freshly ground black pepper

8 to 12 ounces tubular pasta, such as elbow or penne (see note)

Topping:

3 ounces grated Gruyere cheese

1/4 cup plain dry bread crumbs

Yields 6 servings.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Butter 2-quart casserole and coat with dry bread crumbs. Set aside. Melt 4

tablespoons butter in 3 3/4-quart (minimum) saucepan and cook shallots over low heat until they are quite soft but not browned, adding white pepper and salt. Add flour and mustard. Cook, stirring constantly, for 3 to 4 minutes, until mixture is smooth and bubbly, and has taken on a slight "blond" color.

Add milk, cream and brandy, and cook, stirring constantly, until mixture has come to a simmer and begun to thicken. Add nutmeg. Turn heat to low. Add a little white sauce to beaten egg and beat to combine. Add egg mixture to sauce, stirring constantly. Do not let sauce boil. Add 3 ounces Gruyere and the Comte and Petit Basque cheeses. Stir until cheeses are melted, then turn off heat. Add several turns of black pepper. Taste sauce and adjust seasonings, if necessary.

While sauce is being prepared, cook pasta in boiling salted water until almost done. Drain pasta and turn into large bowl. Add sauce and stir. Pour macaroni and cheese into prepared casserole dish and top with remaining 3 ounces grated Gruyere and some bread crumbs. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, until top is lightly browned.

Take casserole out of oven and turn oven to broil, adjusting oven rack as appropriate for your broiler. Return casserole to oven and broil for 1 to 2 minutes to crisp and further brown top, watching carefully. Remove casserole from broiler and allow to rest for 10 minutes before serving.

Notes: Look for Comte and Petite Basque at cheese shops and markets with good cheese selections, such as Whole Foods. The original recipe calls for 8 ounces of pasta and notes that it will look like there is too much sauce, but things will be fine once it bakes. In testing the recipe, we used a little more pasta.

- Jeanene Perry, winner of Taste Artisan Cheese & Gourmet Shop's Mac 'n' Cheese Recipe Challenge.

CREAMY MACARONI AND CHEESE

2 tablespoons butter

1 cup cottage cheese (not low-fat)

2 cups milk (not nonfat)

1 teaspoon dry mustard

Pinch cayenne

Pinch freshly grated nutmeg

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 pound sharp or extra-sharp cheddar cheese, grated

1/2 pound elbow pasta, uncooked

Yields 6 to 8 servings.

Heat oven to 375 F and position an oven rack in upper 1/3 of oven. Use 1 tablespoon butter to butter 9-inch round or square baking pan.

In blender, puree cottage cheese, milk, mustard, cayenne, nutmeg and salt and pepper together. Reserve 1/4 cup grated cheddar cheese for topping. In large bowl, combine remaining grated cheese, milk mixture and uncooked pasta. Pour into prepared pan, cover tightly with foil and bake 30 minutes.

Uncover pan, stir gently, sprinkle with reserved cheese and dot with remaining tablespoon butter. Bake, uncovered, 30 minutes, until browned. Let cool at least 15 minutes before serving.

- The New York Times.

GROWN UP MAC AND CHEESE

4 ounces thick-sliced bacon

Vegetable oil

Kosher salt

2 cups elbow macaroni or cavatappi

1 1/2 cups milk

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

4 ounces Gruyere cheese, grated

3 ounces extra-sharp cheddar, grated

2 ounces blue cheese, such as Roquefort, crumbled

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Pinch nutmeg

2 slices white sandwich bread, crusts removed

2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil leaves

Yields 2 generous servings.

Preheat oven to 400 F. Place baking rack on sheet pan and arrange bacon in 1 layer on baking rack. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until bacon is crisp. Remove pan carefully from oven - there will be hot grease in pan. Transfer bacon to plate lined with paper towels and crumble when it is cool enough to handle.

Drizzle oil into large pot of boiling salted water. Add macaroni and cook according to package directions, 6 to 8 minutes. Drain well.

Meanwhile, heat milk in small saucepan, but don't boil it. Melt butter in medium pot and add flour. Cook over low heat for 2 minutes, stirring with whisk. While whisking, add hot milk and cook for 1 or 2 minutes, until thickened and smooth. Off heat, add Gruyere, cheddar, blue cheese, pepper, nutmeg and salt, to taste. Add cooked macaroni and crumbled bacon, and stir well. Pour into 2 individual-size gratin dishes.

Place bread slices in food processor and pulse until you have coarse crumbs. Add basil and pulse to combine. Sprinkle crumb mixture over pasta. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes, or until sauce is bubbly and macaroni is browned on top.

- Ina Garten, Food Network.

Sold on shells

As any parent can attest, pasta and cheese make a winning combination when it comes to pleasing the picky palate of a child; hence, the popularity of mac and cheese in a box.

While the tried-and-true Kraft Macaroni & Cheese will do in a pinch, food retailers are stocking more varieties these days to widen options for time-pressed parents who don't have the luxury of preparing the dish from scratch.

So which one is sure to please the child in your life? Take a look at the results of our taste test, in which four youngsters, ages 11 to 13, sampled four boxed versions and offered up their opinions and rankings, on a scale of 1 to 10.

For our tasting, each version was prepared with 2 percent milk and 2 tablespoons of butter so that no brand had an advantage over the others.

- Annie's Shells & Real Aged Cheddar Macaroni & Cheese

Tasters liked the use of shells over the conventional tube pasta and "how you don't have to chase the noodles around the plate with your fork," said one child. This version had the "right amount of cheese and not a lot of it," said another. "I liked how the cheese got into the shells so when you take a bite, there is a lot of flavor." (In major supermarkets. $1.99 for a 6-ounce box.)

Score: 8

- Trader Joe's Organic Shells and White Cheddar

The kids liked the shells but were underwhelmed by the taste. One taster likened it to cafeteria macaroni, while another said it had a "good amount of cheese, but it was just OK." (At Trader Joe's. $1.09 for a 6-ounce box.)

Score: 6

- Kraft Macaroni & Cheese

The common complaint about this old stand-by was that it was simply bland. Some also felt the pasta was mushy. "You need to add something to give it taste" was one comment. "I thought it needed more cheese, although it did have good texture," said another taster. (In supermarkets. $1.99 for a 7.25-ounce box.)

Score: 6

- Whole Kids Organic Macaroni & Cheese (with white cheddar)

While this was the least favorite among our tasters, it was the winner in a 2006 taste test conducted by Real Simple magazine. Most of our tasters thought it had little flavor, and a couple complained about a strange after-taste. "The noodles were kind of hard and not very appetizing, and the cheese tasted like it had water in it," observed one of our kid panelists. "I'm so sick of tube noodles," groused another. (At Whole Foods. $1.29 for a 6-ounce box.)

Score: 4

Cooking Corner: Improving on a classic by Lori Weisberg