

THINK Outside THE BOX

Try
Variations
on Mac
and
Cheese
From
Scratch



By JANE P. MARSHALL

New York Times Regional Newspapers

Chef Lisa Schroeder is a missionary with a whisk.

"The world needs food that mothers would make if only they had time," she said.

At Mother's Bistro and Bar in Portland, Ore., Schroeder serves pot roast, meat loaf and macaroni and cheese — food like mother made "back when mothers used to cook," she said.

And knew how to cook.

"We have a whole generation who doesn't cook and their children don't cook." And that makes Schroeder sad. "I think every mother should know how to make these."

Mother's offers a different mac and cheese every day.

On the day we caught up with her in Mother's kitchen, she was serving Fusilli Pasta with Roast Garlic, Prosciutto and Provolone Cheese. Another of her favorites is Pasta with Smoked Salmon, Wild Mushrooms and Parmesan Cheese.

"I could go on and on," Schroeder said. "There are so many different American cheeses, the possibilities are endless."

She also takes advantage of the fresh seasonal produce available at her North-western kitchen doorstep.

Schroeder's mac and cheese creations are quick because she eliminated a traditional step. Instead of stirring up a white sauce, she makes a cream reduction and uses the cheese as a thickener.

Macaroni and cheese has a rather unromantic history.

During the Depression, macaroni and cheese was affordable, thus popular. During the 1950s it became a standard in school cafeterias and on home tables. In New England, no good funeral is complete without delivering the families' favorite Mac 'n' Cheese recipe, according to Roberta MacDonald, senior vice president at Cabot Cheese in Vermont.

Today, kitschy yet everlasting mac and cheese has its own Web site, an international fan club and a list of songs memorializing the dish.

Why is mac and cheese so fondly recalled? Why is it a comfort food?

It's creamy and white, prerequisites for comfort food, Schroeder said. Think mashed potatoes, custard, ice cream and vanilla malts.

The chef also said it is because "most of us grew up on mac and cheese. We were raised on it. And for most of us it was out of a blue box."

That, said MacDonald, is exactly the point.

"We need to think outside the box," she said.

Chefs have been adding exotics to



A mixture of yellow, green and red bell peppers, along with shredded chicken, help bring a unique flavor to Southwest Mac and Jack.
Top right: Andouille sausage adds an extra kick to Cajun Macaroni and Cheese.

Photos: Cabot Cheese

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IN APPRECIATION

Literary Giant Kept Growing

Play Pokes Fun At Life in Theater

MACARONI RECIPES

MACARONI AND CHEESE WITH WILD MUSHROOMS

Yields 4 to 6 servings

- 3 tablespoons olive oil, divided
 - 1 large onion, minced
 - 1 celery stalk, minced
 - ½ pound wild mushrooms, minced
 - ½ pound, about 3 cups, Gruyere cheese, grated
 - ½ pound, about 3 cups, Monterey Jack cheese, grated
 - ½ pound, about 3 cups, Parmesan cheese, grated
 - ½ cup butter
 - 1 cup heavy cream
 - 2 tablespoons dry white wine, more if needed
 - Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
 - 1 pound ziti or other small-cut pasta
- Garnish options:** 2 tablespoons ground black truffles in oil, 2 tablespoons minced fresh chives or ½ cup fresh peas, cooked until tender

In small skillet, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium heat. Add onion and celery and saute until soft, about 5 minutes. Scrape the vegetables into a serving bowl.

In same pan, heat remaining 1 tablespoon olive oil over medium heat. Add mushrooms and cook until they release their liquid, about 10 minutes. Set aside.

In heavy saucepan, melt cheeses and butter over low heat, stirring constantly, about 5 minutes. Add cream and wine. Stir. Sauce may look curdled. Just keep stirring. Cook for about 5 minutes or until the sauce is smooth and a little thicker than heavy cream. Add more wine, a tablespoon at a time, if necessary.

Meanwhile, bring large pot of salted water to boil. Add pasta. Cook until pasta is al dente, about 12 minutes. Drain and pour pasta on top of celery and onions. Add cheese sauce and mushrooms. Mix well. Add salt and pepper to taste. Garnish as desired.

Serve immediately.

— From "At Mesa's Edge" (Houghton Mifflin, \$24)

OVEN-BAKED PENNE WITH ONIONS, WALNUTS AND GOAT CHEESE

Yields 6 to 8 servings

- 1 pound penne
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 small onion, sliced
- ½ cup dry white wine
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme
- Pinch red pepper flakes
- 3 ounces chopped walnuts
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ½ cup heavy cream
- 5-6 ounces fresh goat cheese
- 2 teaspoons walnut oil
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese, preferably Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add penne and cook until pasta is al dente, about 10 minutes. Drain and put into a large bowl. Toss with olive oil.

Heat oven to 350 degrees. In medium saute pan over medium heat, melt butter. Add onion and cook until tender and golden, about 10 minutes. Add white wine, bring to a boil and stir, scraping any browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Add onion to penne. Add thyme, pepper flakes and half the walnuts, toss well to combine. Season with salt and pepper.

Combine cream with 2 ounces of the goat cheese. Toss with pasta. Pour pasta into a high-sided baking dish. Dot evenly with remaining goat cheese and sprinkle with remaining walnuts. Drizzle with walnut oil, then sprinkle with Parmesan.

Bake for 15 minutes or until bubbly. Sprinkle with parsley and serve.

— From "Bistro Cooking at Home" (Broadway Books, \$35)

SOUTHWEST MAC AND JACK

Yields 6 servings

- ¾ cups heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup onions, finely diced
- ½ cup bell peppers, finely diced (preferably a mixture of yellow, green and red)
- 1 jalapeño pepper, seeds removed, diced (optional)
- 2 cups, about ½ pound, Pepper Jack or Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
- 1 cup leftover roasted or boiled chicken, shredded
- ½ teaspoon salt, to taste
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper, to taste
- 1 pound penne or other pasta, cooked in plenty of salted water until al dente, drained
- ½ cup chipotle sour cream (recipe below) or regular sour cream
- ½ cup green onions, including green part, sliced thin for garnish

Place cream in a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan and bring to a boil. Boil cream about 10 minutes or until it is reduced to ¾ cups. Skim top. Watch carefully as cream may boil up suddenly. Set aside.

In a large saute pan over high heat, add butter, onions and peppers, then saute until vegetables begin to soften. Lower heat to medium and continue to cook until the vegetables are very soft, about 4 minutes.

Add reduced heavy cream and bring to a boil over high heat. Lower heat to medium-high and continue to simmer, about 5 minutes.

Add cheese and stir well until the cheese is completely melted. Add shredded chicken and stir with a wooden spoon to combine. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Continue to simmer another 3 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Toss in cooked, drained pasta and mix well. To serve, top with a dollop of chipotle or regular sour cream and garnish with finely sliced green onions.

— Recipe from Chef Lisa Schroeder, Mother's Bistro and Bar, Portland, Ore., on behalf of the American Dairy Association

CHIPOTLE SOUR CREAM

- ½ teaspoon pureed chipotles en adobo
- ¼ cup sour cream

To puree the chipotles en adobo, pour content of the can, including the liquid, into a food processor. Puree until smooth. Use a fine sieve to strain into a bowl, pushing puree through with a rubber spatula. Reserve any unused puree for future use in the refrigerator — it will keep 1 to 2 weeks.

In a small mixing bowl, whisk ½ teaspoon of the pureed chipotles en adobo with ¼ cup of sour cream. Set aside.

CAJUN MACARONI AND CHEESE WITH ANDOUILLE SAUSAGE

Yields 6 servings

- ¾ cups heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup onions, finely diced
- ½ cup peppers, finely diced (preferably a mixture of yellow, green and red)
- 1 cup, about 6 ounces, andouille sausage, cut into ¼-inch-thick half moons
- 2 cups, about ½ pound, sharp Cheddar cheese, shredded
- ½ teaspoon salt, to taste
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper, to taste
- 1 pound spiral or other pasta, cooked in plenty of salted water until al dente and drained
- ¼ cup green onions, including green part, sliced thin for garnish

Place cream in a large, heavy-bottomed saucepan and bring to a boil. Boil cream about 10 minutes or until it is reduced to ¾ cups. Skim top. Watch carefully as cream may boil up suddenly. Set aside.

In a large saute pan over high heat, add butter, onions and peppers and saute until vegetables begin to soften. Add andouille sausage and continue to cook over high heat until the vegetables begin to turn golden and the sausage begins to color. Lower heat and continue to saute until the vegetables are very soft, about 4 minutes.

Add reduced heavy cream and bring to a boil over high heat. Lower heat to medium-high and continue to simmer, about 5 minutes.

Add cheese and stir well with a wooden spoon until the cheese is well melted. Season with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Continue to simmer another 3 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Toss in cooked, drained pasta and mix well. To serve, garnish with finely sliced green onions.

— Recipe from Chef Lisa Schroeder, Mother's Bistro and Bar, Portland, Ore., on behalf of the American Dairy Association

SLOW COOKER MACARONI AND CHEESE

Yields 6 servings

- 4 tablespoons salted butter
- ½ cup all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 4½ cups milk
- 12 ounces, about 2½ cups, uncooked elbow macaroni
- 4 cups, about 16 ounces, grated extra sharp Cheddar cheese
- ½ cup unflavored dry bread crumbs
- 2 teaspoons olive or vegetable oil

Place butter in large microwave-safe bowl and cover top loosely with plastic wrap to prevent spattering. Microwave on high power until butter is melted, about 1 minute. Whisk in flour and salt until well combined and microwave, uncovered, for 1½ minutes longer.

Whisk in milk, adding it gradually at first. Then stir in macaroni. Microwave, uncovered, for 5 minutes. Stir well to break up any clumps of macaroni, then microwave for 9 minutes longer, or until sauce is thickened and macaroni is starting to soften.

Lightly coat inside of crockpot with nonstick cooking spray or rub with oil. Add macaroni mixture. Stir in cheese until well combined.

In small bowl, work together bread crumbs and oil with fingertips until well blended; sprinkle evenly over macaroni. Cover and cook on high setting for 1 hour, or until tender and bubbling on edges.

— From Cabot Cheese

Box

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macaroni and cheese for several years. One menu lists Macaroni and Cheese with Black Truffle Mushrooms, Garlic and Smoked Niman Ranch Ham for \$17.95.

A recent issue of New York Magazine listed hot spots for mac and cheese — No. 1 was Blue Smoke on East 27th St. for its "obscenely rich, ultra creamy, like a Stouffer's version gone to finishing school."

Other Schroeder pasta combinations are Smoked Cheddar and Asparagus, and Smoked Salmon, Cream Cheese and Dill.

"We serve 20 or 30 mac and cheese orders a day. People come in just for that," she said. Even though it isn't on the menu, customers can order plain old-fashioned macaroni and cheese any time they want.

MacDonald will take hers just plain, thank you.

She told this story:

"We have a 4-year-old cheese, only available on the Web, which costs more than \$25 a pound. Fans write how as cheddar junkies they have reached sharp levels of need that exceed our Extra Sharp and Hunters and require only Cabot 4-year-old cheddar to make Mac 'n' Cheese. They describe their eyes rolling back in their heads as one would read of chocolate or the most succulent sauce."

From the sublime to the ridiculous, one fan Web site offers its own reasons macaroni and cheese is so popular:

■ You can still eat it after you lose your teeth.

■ OK to chew during the national anthem.

■ Some brands glow in the dark for romantic meals.

■ Doesn't taste like Brussels sprouts.

■ You can tell small children it's yellow candy.

■ Has no vegetables!

■ Cheaper than Prozac.

MAC TRIVIA

■ In 1802, Thomas Jefferson served macaroni and cheese in the White House.

■ In 1877, Juliet Corsen wrote a little book called "Fifteen Cent Dinners for Families of Six" featuring Macaroni with Cheese. "It will make just as hearty and strengthening a meal as meat," she wrote, "and will cost about twelve cents."

■ In the 1806 "Ingenious Cook Book," a Kansas woman offered this recipe: "Take 1 package macaroni, break up in small pieces. Cover with boiling water, salt to taste, let boil until soft. Then butter a pudding or bread pan well, cover bottom with macaroni, then sprinkle thickly with grated or chopped cheese, pepper well and put small bits of butter on top, then another layer of macaroni, then cheese, and so on until the macaroni is all used up and cheese is on top. Pour over this a cup of milk or cream and bake until nicely browned. Can be prepared the same with oysters, using oysters same as the cheese."

■ In 1937, Kraft boxed macaroni and cheese as Kraft Dinner, priced 19 cents.

■ In 1992, the Canadian rock group Bare Naked Ladies sang "If I Had a Million Dollars — I wouldn't eat Kraft Dinner." Fans their macaroni with and without boxes. The musicians asked fans to stop it. "Macaroni and cheese hurts," they said.

— Jane P. Marshall

"We're hoping," MacDonald added, "that more of America will understand the cosmic joy to be found in making Mac 'n' Cheese from scratch."

Jane P. Marshall writes for the New York Times Regional Newspapers.

Be Food Smart

Complete microwave cooking.

Microwave ovens are easy to use and convenient for preparing meals or beating up leftovers. Sometimes, however, microwaved foods have cold spots or uncooked areas. Here are some food safety tips to help ensure thorough cooking:

- Cover food with a lid or plastic wrap to help lock in the heat and moisture.
- Stir and rotate your food during cooking.
- Observe standing time called for in recipe or package directions (food often finishes cooking during this time).
- Check internal temperature with a meat thermometer to ensure doneness.



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