

Baked Mac and Cheese with Crispy Panko Topping

Ingredients

- **For the Pasta:**
 - 16 oz elbow macaroni
 - 1 tbsp olive oil
 - Salt, for boiling water
- **For the Cheese Mixture:**
 - 4 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded
 - 2 cups Gruyère cheese, shredded
(Combine and divide: 4 cups for cheese sauce, 2 cups reserved for layering)
- **For the Cheese Sauce:**
 - 4 tbsp butter
 - ⅓ cup all-purpose flour
 - 3 cups whole milk
 - 1 cup heavy cream
 - 1 tsp salt
 - 1 tsp black pepper
- **For the Topping:**
 - 6 tbsp melted butter
 - 1 ½ cups panko breadcrumbs
 - ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
 - ¼ tsp smoked paprika

Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F (175°C), lightly grease a 9×13-inch baking dish, and set it aside.
2. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil, add the macaroni, cook for 7–8 minutes until al dente, then drain and toss with olive oil to prevent sticking.
3. Melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat, add the flour, and whisk for 1–2 minutes until smooth and lightly golden.
4. Slowly whisk in the milk and heavy cream, cook for 5–7 minutes while whisking often until slightly thickened, then remove from heat.
5. Whisk in 2 cups of the cheese mixture until melted and smooth, then add another 2 cups and whisk again until creamy.
6. Add the cooked macaroni into the cheese sauce and stir until evenly coated.
7. Pour half of the mac and cheese into the prepared baking dish, sprinkle the remaining 2 cups of shredded cheese mixture over it, and spoon the rest of the mac and cheese on top in an even layer.
8. In a small bowl, combine the melted butter, panko, Parmesan, and smoked paprika, and mix until the breadcrumbs are evenly coated.
9. Sprinkle the topping evenly over the macaroni, bake uncovered for 30 minutes until golden and bubbly, and broil for 1–2 minutes if you want extra crunch, keeping a close eye on it.

Note & Storage

- Make ahead by assembling the dish up to 1 day in advance and refrigerating; add 10–15 minutes to the baking time if cooking from cold.
- Store leftovers in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.
- Reheat gently on the stovetop or in the microwave with a splash of milk to restore creaminess.
- Gruyère adds a nutty, slightly sweet flavor and melts smoothly for a rich sauce.
- Good substitutes include Swiss, Monterey Jack, Provolone, or a 50/50 mix of mozzarella and Parmesan.
- Shred cheese from the block for the creamiest sauce; pre-shredded cheese can make it gritty.