

## stupid-simple make-ahead mac and cheese

BY CAROLINE CHAMBERS

Serves 6 to 8

Cook time:

Tools:

- Large pot
- Colander/strainer
- Greased 9x13-inch baking dish or 12-inch [cast iron skillet](#)

Ingredients:

- Kosher salt
- 1 pound large shell pasta (but any short noodle works)
- 12 ounces cheddar cheese (do NOT buy pre-shredded), divided
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 4 ounces cream cheese
- 1/2 cup whole milk
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- OPTIONAL: pesto, buffalo sauce, crab meat, sun-dried tomatoes, lobster meat, you get the drill!

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add a **HUGE pinch of kosher salt**. Cook **1 pound short pasta noodles** al dente per package instructions. That means that when you test a piece, it should still taste a *little bit* hard. Why? Because we're actually going to bake the mac and cheese, so the pasta is going to keep cooking and we don't want it to get too soft!

BEFORE YOU DRAIN THE PASTA, reserve **1/2 cup pasta cooking water**.

Meanwhile, grate **12 ounces cheddar cheese** and **1 cup of Parmesan cheese**.

After draining the pasta, return it to the pot along with **1/4 cup of the reserved pasta cooking water, 8 ounces shredded cheddar cheese (AKA A LITTLE MORE THAN HALF BUT NOT ALL OF IT!), 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese, 4 ounces cream cheese, 1/2 cup whole milk, 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, and 1 teaspoon kosher salt.**

Continue stirring until everything is totally melted and smooth. If the sauce is too thick, stir in more pasta cooking water. Everything should melt nicely off the heat, but, if needed, you can turn the burner back onto very low heat to help the cheeses melt.

Taste and season! You can add salt, pepper, nutmeg, a little ground mustard. Maybe you're in the mood for something a little different — try adding a swirl of pesto, a handful of sun-dried tomatoes, or buffalo sauce. Or make it fancy with some crab or lobster meat! Or add a green like steamed chopped broccoli! Do your thing!

Transfer the mac and cheese to a greased 9x13-inch baking dish or 12-inch cast iron skillet. IF COOKING IMMEDIATELY, sprinkle with the remaining **4 ounces shredded cheddar cheese**. If *not* cooking immediately, let it cool down. Once cool, top with the remaining cheese and cover and refrigerate for up to 72 hours.

When you want to eat in about 45 minutes, preheat oven to 375°F.

Bake uncovered for 25 to 30 minutes, until the cheese is melted and bubbly.

Let the mac and cheese rest for at least 5 minutes before beginning to serve it. Enjoy!

#### NOTES:

- If you use a cast iron skillet, you can cook this on the grill at 375°F over indirect heat (no burners lit underneath it).
- Or — if you have a smoker — smoke it for 30 minutes over 200°F, then crank up the heat to 375 to get the cheese nice and melted. Again, always over indirect heat (otherwise the bottom of the noodles will burn).