

cooks illustrated macaroni and cheese

Cooks Illustrated macaroni and cheese is often hailed as the ultimate comfort food, a delightful dish that transcends generations and brings a sense of nostalgia to many. This creamy, cheesy pasta dish is not just a staple in American households but also a canvas for various interpretations and innovations. Cooks Illustrated, known for its meticulous testing and research in the culinary world, has developed a macaroni and cheese recipe that stands out for its perfect balance of flavor and texture. In this article, we will delve into the history, ingredients, preparation methods, and tips for making the perfect macaroni and cheese, as inspired by Cooks Illustrated.

History of Macaroni and Cheese

Macaroni and cheese has a rich history that dates back centuries. Here are some key points regarding its origins:

- Early Beginnings: The dish can trace its roots to the 1700s in Europe, particularly in Italy, where pasta and cheese were combined in various forms.
- Thomas Jefferson: The dish gained popularity in the United States in the 18th century, largely thanks to Thomas Jefferson, who encountered macaroni while in France and brought it back to America. He even served it at a state dinner.
- Culinary Evolution: Over the years, macaroni and cheese evolved, with various regions putting their unique spin on the dish. From the creamy versions of the South to the baked styles popular in New England, it became a household favorite.

Understanding the Cooks Illustrated Approach

Cooks Illustrated is renowned for its rigorous testing and research to create recipes that are not only delicious but also practical for home cooks. Their macaroni and cheese recipe exemplifies this philosophy:

Testing Methodology

- Ingredient Selection: Cooks Illustrated conducts extensive taste tests to determine the best ingredients. For macaroni and cheese, they focus on the type of cheese, pasta, and additional flavor enhancers.
- Cooking Techniques: The publication experiments with different cooking methods and times to find the optimal way to achieve the perfect texture and flavor.
- Consumer Feedback: Many recipes are refined based on feedback from home

cooks, ensuring that each recipe is user-friendly and yields consistent results.

Key Ingredients for Cooks Illustrated Macaroni and Cheese

The success of Cooks Illustrated macaroni and cheese lies in its carefully chosen ingredients. Here's a breakdown of what you need:

1. Pasta:

- Use elbow macaroni or cavatappi for optimal cheese adherence.
- Whole wheat or gluten-free options can be used for dietary preferences.

2. Cheese:

- A blend of sharp cheddar and Gruyère is recommended for a rich, complex flavor.
- Avoid pre-grated cheese, as it contains anti-caking agents that affect melting.

3. Milk and Cream:

- Whole milk and heavy cream create a rich and creamy base.
- A combination of the two ensures the dish is indulgent without being overly heavy.

4. Butter and Flour:

- A roux made from butter and flour serves as the thickening agent for the cheese sauce.
- This classic technique is crucial for achieving the desired creaminess.

5. Seasonings:

- A touch of mustard powder and smoked paprika enhances the flavor profile.
- Salt and pepper should be adjusted to taste.

Step-by-Step Preparation of Cooks Illustrated Macaroni and Cheese

Creating the perfect macaroni and cheese requires attention to detail and a few essential steps. Here's a comprehensive guide:

Ingredients List

- 1 pound elbow macaroni
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour

- 4 cups whole milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 12 ounces sharp cheddar cheese, grated
- 8 ounces Gruyère cheese, grated
- 1 teaspoon mustard powder
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Optional: breadcrumbs for topping

Preparation Steps

1. Cook the Pasta:

- Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the macaroni and cook until al dente according to package instructions.
- Drain and set aside, reserving a cup of pasta water for later use.

2. Make the Cheese Sauce:

- In a large saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat.
- Whisk in the flour and cook for about 1 minute, stirring continuously to form a roux.
- Gradually add the whole milk and heavy cream, whisking constantly to prevent lumps.
- Bring the mixture to a simmer, allowing it to thicken. This should take around 5-7 minutes.

3. Incorporate the Cheese:

- Remove the saucepan from heat and stir in the grated cheddar and Gruyère until melted and smooth.
- Add the mustard powder, smoked paprika, salt, and pepper. Adjust seasoning to taste.

4. Combine Pasta and Sauce:

- Add the cooked macaroni to the cheese sauce, stirring to combine thoroughly. If the mixture is too thick, add reserved pasta water until the desired consistency is reached.

5. Baking (Optional):

- For a baked version, preheat the oven to 350°F (175°C).
- Transfer the macaroni and cheese to a greased baking dish. If desired, sprinkle breadcrumbs on top for added crunch.
- Bake for 20-25 minutes or until bubbly and golden brown on top.

Tips for Success

To ensure your Cooks Illustrated macaroni and cheese turns out perfectly every time, consider the following tips:

- Cheese Quality: Always use high-quality cheese for the best flavor. Grating your cheese from a block will yield better melting results.
- Pasta Cooking: Cook the pasta slightly less than al dente, as it will continue cooking in the oven or when mixed with the cheese sauce.
- Taste as You Go: Adjust seasonings throughout the cooking process. A little more salt or a pinch of spices can enhance the overall flavor dramatically.
- Experiment with Add-ins: Consider adding cooked bacon, sautéed vegetables, or even lobster for a gourmet twist on the traditional recipe.

Conclusion

Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese is a timeless dish that showcases the beauty of simple ingredients combined with expert techniques. By following the detailed steps and tips outlined in this article, home cooks can recreate this comforting classic with ease. Whether enjoyed as a cozy family meal or served at a gathering, this macaroni and cheese recipe is sure to delight and satisfy. Embrace the joy of cooking, and let this dish remind you of home-cooked meals and cherished memories. Happy cooking!

Frequently Asked Questions

What makes Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese unique compared to other recipes?

Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese is unique due to its focus on achieving a perfectly creamy texture and rich flavor, often utilizing a combination of cheeses and a specific technique that involves making a béchamel sauce to create a smooth cheese sauce.

What type of cheese is recommended for Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese?

Cook's Illustrated often recommends a blend of sharp cheddar and Gruyère cheese for their macaroni and cheese recipe, as this combination provides a balance of sharpness and creaminess.

Can I make Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese ahead of time?

Yes, you can prepare Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese ahead of time. After assembling the dish, you can refrigerate it and bake it later. Just ensure to adjust the baking time if it's coming straight from the fridge.

What is the best pasta shape to use for Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese?

The best pasta shape for Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese is elbow macaroni, but other shapes like cavatappi or shells can also work well as they hold the cheese sauce effectively.

How does Cook's Illustrated suggest achieving a crispy topping for macaroni and cheese?

Cook's Illustrated suggests achieving a crispy topping by mixing breadcrumbs with melted butter and sometimes cheese, then sprinkling it on top of the macaroni and cheese before baking for a golden, crunchy crust.

Is there a gluten-free option for Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese?

Yes, you can make a gluten-free version of Cook's Illustrated macaroni and cheese by using gluten-free pasta and ensuring that any other ingredients, like breadcrumbs, are also gluten-free.

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