

January 4, 2006

The Winter Cook

## Macaroni and Lots of Cheese

By JULIA MOSKIN

MACARONI and cheese is just the kind of all-American, old-fashioned home cooking I was not raised on.

New York City in the 1970's was a hotbed of culinary radicalism. Food-forward parents like mine served dinners of homemade falafel, Mediterranean fish stew or stir-fried beef with broccoli. To me, dishes like spaghetti and meatballs, mashed potatoes with gravy and macaroni and cheese seemed exotic and unattainable.

Naturally, this is where my greatest passions lie as a cook. And after the frenzy of holiday cooking, a simple dish like macaroni and cheese is just what I want to make now.

Lacking a family recipe, I turned to cookbooks for guidance. A strange substance called "white sauce" cropped up again and again. Bread crumbs, Worcestershire sauce and alien cheeses like smoked gouda and parmigiano also kept finding their way in. None of the recipes came close to my fantasy of what the dish should be: nothing more than tender elbows of pasta suspended in pure molten cheddar, with a chewy, golden-brown crust of cheese on top.

While reading the following passage in a 20-year-old cookbook called "Simple Cooking," the problem became clear:

" A good dish of macaroni and cheese is hard to find these days. The recipes in most cookbooks are not to be trusted...usually it is their vexatious infatuation with white sauce, a noxious paste of flour-thickened milk, for this dish flavored with a tiny grating of cheese. Contrary to popular belief, this is not macaroni and cheese but macaroni with cheese sauce. It is awful stuff and every cookbook in which it appears should be thrown out the window."

The book's author, John Thorne, still adheres to this position, but said that he has largely given up the fight. "Starting at about the turn of the 20th century, there was a huge fashion for white sauce in America - chafing-dish stuff like chicken à la king, or creamed onions," he said last week. "They were cheap and seemed elegant, and their legacy is that people choose 'creamy' over everything else. But I maintain that macaroni and cheese should be primarily cheesy."

Marlena Spieler, author of a forthcoming book, "Macaroni and Cheese" (Chronicle), agreed that most recipes simply do not have enough cheese. "I believe in making a cheese sauce and also using shredded cheese," she said.

But she refuses to forgo white sauce altogether. "You need a little goo to keep the pasta and cheese together," she said. Having made a global study of the subject, she ticked off a list of alternative binders: mascarpone, crème fraîche, eggs, heavy cream, egg yolks, cottage cheese, butter and evaporated milk, which she deems a little too sweet but "delightfully trashy."

Like me, Ms. Spieler believes that macaroni and cheese, which is often served alongside fried chicken or barbecue, deserves pride of place as a main dish. "I love it so much that I want to focus on it," she said. A crisp

green salad and a glass of wine turn mac and cheese into a meal, she added.

I first made Mr. Thorne's recipe, a step in the right direction: it combines a whole pound of cheddar cheese with half a pound of macaroni. But the method, which entails taking the dish out of the oven every five minutes to stir in more cheese, is tiresome. And so, armed with the knowledge that a seemingly outrageous 2:1 ratio of cheese to macaroni is indeed possible, I set out in search of the ideal recipe.

At cheese counters across New York City, complex blends of pungent, unaged, rind-washed and cave-ripened cheeses have been devised for makers of macaroni and cheese. Rob Kaufelt, who owns Murray's Cheese in Greenwich Village, counsels a 30-50-20 blend of Swiss Gruyère, young Irish cheddar and Parmigiano-Reggiano, or a blend of English cheddars. At Artisanal, cooks are steered toward the softness of Italian fontina and Welsh Caerphilly.

These are all indisputably glorious cheeses. But they do not all belong in a casserole dish. An impromptu focus group of children living in my apartment building showed a strong preference for the cheddar family. Ultimately, I found, the dirty little secret of an honest macaroni and cheese is often American cheese.

American cheese is simply cheddar or colby that is ground and emulsified with water, said Bonnie Chlebecsek, a test kitchen manager at Land O'Lakes in Arden Hills, Minn.

"The process denatures the proteins in the cheese," she said, "which in plain English means that it won't clump up or get grainy when you melt it. With natural cheese, it's much harder to get a smooth melt." The cheese industry and the Food and Drug Administration call a cheese "natural" if it has been produced from milk, as cheddar and mozzarella (and virtually all other nonindustrial cheeses) are.

Plain American cheese, labeled pasteurized process cheese, contains the most natural cheese and is the best for cooking. American cheese derivatives are made from cheese and additives like sodium phosphates (acids that promote melting), nonfat dry milk and carrageenan. In descending order of their relationship to natural cheese, they are cheese food, cheese spread (such as Velveeta) and cheese product.

Daphne Mahoney, the Jamaican-born owner of Daphne's Caribbean Express in Manhattan's East Village, makes a wonderfully dense version of macaroni and cheese that combines American cheese with extra-sharp cheddar. Macaroni pie is hugely popular in the Caribbean, especially on islands like Jamaica and Barbados that once received regular stocks of cheddar from other members of the British commonwealth: Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

"We put a little pepper in it to spice it up," she said. "But as long as you don't make the macaroni soggy, and you use plenty of cheese, it will be good."

The macaroni must not be slippery and soft, but firm and substantial. This is not the time to bring out your whole-wheat penne and artisanal orecchiette: elbow pasta is the way to go.

One of the most surprising recipes I tried called for uncooked pasta. Full of doubt, I mixed raw elbow noodles with a sludge of cottage cheese, milk and grated cheese. The result was stunning: the noodles obediently absorbed the liquid as they cooked, encasing themselves in fluffy cheese and a crust of deep rich brown.

The last decision - to top or not to top - is easily dispensed with. Resist the temptation to fiddle around with bread crumbs, corn flakes, tortilla chips and other ingredients that have nothing to do with the dish. When there is enough cheese in and on top of your creation, a brown, crisp crust of toasted cheese will form naturally. There is nothing more delicious.

The moral of the story: When in doubt, add more cheese.

