

It's incredibly rich and decadent, creamy and cheesy, and somehow still packed with nutritious spinach. One bite, and you'll be singing, "Maria! I just met a spinach named Maria!"

This is no ordinary creamed spinach; it's the most popular side on the menu at the Ke'e Grill, an upscale seafood restaurant in Boca Raton, Fla. The base of the sauce is a bechamel, but only barely thickened because the cream and cheese are weighty themselves, and the spinach adds quite a bit of body. The buttered panko crumb topping is a delightful textural contrast to the richness that bubbles underneath.

It is relatively easy to make, but it takes a bit of time, so read the recipe instructions all the way through and plan accordingly.

INGREDIENTS (FOR 6 SERVINGS)

1 lb. frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed *very* dry
6 Tbsp. unsalted butter
3 Tbsp. all-purpose flour (a 1:1 gluten-free alternative would be fine)
2 medium shallots, finely minced
Kosher salt and freshly cracked black pepper
3/4 cup whole milk
1 cup heavy cream
1/2 cup shredded fontina cheese
1/3 cup shredded gruyere cheese
1 whole bulb [roasted garlic](#)* (see notes)
Pinch of ground cayenne pepper
1/2 tsp. dry mustard

Topping:

3 Tbsp. salted butter
1/2 cup unseasoned panko breadcrumbs (or substitute gluten-free crumbs, if necessary)
3 Tbsp. grated [parm-romano blend](#)*

*NOTES

It is important that you use roasted garlic, and not fresh, which would be much too sharp for spinach Maria. If you have never made your own roasted garlic, you can follow the recipe link for easy instructions, and you'll want to make that ahead so it is ready for your spinach Maria.

We keep a large container of freshly grated parmesan and romano cheese blend on hand all the time, and you can follow that recipe link as well if you'd like to give it a try. Or simply use a good quality parmesan from the supermarket deli (please, for the love of good food, not the stuff in the shiny green can).

INSTRUCTIONS

Prepare the spinach by thawing, rinsing and draining. It must be squeezed very dry for this recipe, and I recommend spreading it out onto a clean, unscented kitchen towel and rolling and twisting to extract all the excess moisture.

In a medium, heavy-bottomed sauce pot, melt the unsalted butter. Stir in the flour and minced shallots. Season with salt and pepper and cook over medium-low heat a few minutes, until the mixture is bubbly and has a slight nutty fragrance.

Add the milk all at once and whisk until smooth and thickened. Stir in the heavy cream until blended. Add the fontina and gruyere cheeses and stir until melted through. Stir in cayenne and dry mustard. Squeeze the roasted garlic directly into the sauce and whisk to break up the pieces.

Optional: At this point, the cream-cheese sauce will appear chunky, with visible bits of softened onion and roasted garlic. If you have an immersion blender, I highly recommend using it to cream up the sauce further; 60 seconds should do it. This step is optional, but it amplifies the creamy texture of any bechamel-based sauce, so I do it even for simple mac and cheese recipes.

Break up the packed dry spinach into the sauce and stir to blend it. It may seem that there is not enough spinach to match the sauce, but as you stir and blend, the bits will separate and disperse more evenly. Give the mixture a taste and adjust seasonings (salt, pepper, cayenne) to your liking.

Divide the spinach Maria mixture evenly into six 1/2-cup ramekins and place them on a small baking sheet. If you are preparing it ahead, cover them with plastic wrap and refrigerate up to one day. Bring them to near-room temperature before baking.

In a small saucepan or skillet, melt salted butter and toss the panko crumbs in it until moistened. Stir in parm-romano blend just until evenly mixed. Divide the topping among the ramekins. Bake on the cookie sheet at 350° F for about 25 minutes, until the crumb topping is crispy and golden, and the spinach Maria is bubbly at the edges. Serve immediately.