

Smoky Chipotle Mac & Cheese – Comfort du Jour

This is a spicy spin on my basic mac and cheese, with the addition of chipotle, one of the most favored flavors at our house. I've opted to use a couple of spoonfuls of pureed chipotle with adobo sauce. These are the little cans you find in the "international" section of the supermarket. Chipotle peppers are essentially dried, smoked jalapenos that have been rehydrated to a plump state. We dump the entire contents of a small can into the food processor, to be used in a variety of Mexican-themed dishes.

I chose whole grain rotini for its heft and texture, making this mac and cheese a meal unto itself. When you choose a pasta with lots of surface area (such as rotini), you must either make extra sauce or use less pasta (all those twists and curves are going to hold a lot of sauce). I topped the dish with a mixture of crumbled crispy fried jalapenos (from Trader Joe's) and plain panko breadcrumbs.

INGREDIENTS

2 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
1/2 large onion, diced fairly fine
3 Tbsp. salted butter
4 Tbsp. all-purpose flour
2 cups milk
6 oz. yellow American cheese, cubed* (see notes)
10 oz. medium-sharp yellow cheddar, shredded
2 Tbsp. chipotle w/ adobo puree (more or less, depending on your tolerance for heat)
A few shakes of ground cumin, for added smokiness
Salt and pepper to taste
2/3 lb. whole grain rotini (if using smoother pasta, use an entire pound)

TOPPING:

1/3 cup crispy fried jalapenos (or fried onions)
1/4 cup plain panko breadcrumbs

*NOTES

I used to think that American cheese was fake food, but [this article on Serious Eats](#) convinced me otherwise. Yes, it is processed, but it is processed with special salts to result in a smooth, creamy texture when melted. I do not feel this way about the brand that begins with a V (and I think you all know which one I'm referring to), but I am OK with American cheese now and then, and I consider it essential as a melting base for my mac and cheese.

If you have an immersion blender, I hope you'll follow the steps that I'll describe in the instructions. It is optional, of course, but I call it my secret weapon for making the creamiest cheese sauce ever. 😊

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Heat a heavy-bottomed saucepot over medium heat. Add olive oil and sauté diced onions until they are softened and slightly translucent. If you intend to use my immersion blender technique, transfer half of the onions to a separate bowl before proceeding. You'll add them back to the sauce after blending.

Smoky Chipotle Mac & Cheese – Comfort du Jour

2. Add butter to what remains in the saucepot. When the butter is fully melted and bubbling, add the flour and whisk to incorporate. Cook this over medium heat until the whole mixture is covered in big bubbles and the color turns toasty and golden.
3. Add the milk to the pot and whisk to blend. Stir or whisk almost constantly until mixture is thickened and bubbly. This will take 7 to 10 minutes, depending on your stove and the temperature of the milk when you started.
4. Preheat the oven to 350°F if you plan to bake the mac and cheese. I usually also start cooking my pasta or macaroni at this point, so I can add the pasta to the sauce while both are still warm.
5. Add the cubes of American cheese and whisk until fully incorporated into the sauce. Add the shredded cheddar and whisk again until blended.
6. Stir in chipotle puree, perhaps a little at a time, tasting and adjusting to your heat preference. If desired, add a few shakes of ground cumin for additional smokiness.
7. For super-silky cheese sauce, use an immersion blender for about 60 seconds. After it is smoothed to your liking, add the reserved sauteed onions back into the sauce.
8. Combine the crispy fried jalapeno pieces and panko crumbs in the small bowl of a food processor. Pulse several times, until the mixture is even and crumb-like, but not powdery.
9. Drain pasta completely (do not rinse it!) and add it to the sauce, folding gently to incorporate. If you are using a rotini or other shape with lots of surface area, add the pasta in batches to be sure you end up with the pasta-to-sauce ratio you expect. Remember that if you plan to bake the mac and cheese, some of the creaminess will be absorbed into the pasta, so keep it creamier than desired initially.
10. Transfer the cheesy pasta to an oven-safe casserole dish. Scatter the jalapeno-panko crumbs over the top of the mac and cheese. Cover with foil and bake for 15 minutes. Remove foil and bake an additional 20 to 30 minutes, until crust is browned and sauce is bubbling around all the edges.