Five-Cheese Baked Mac & Cheese

Golden, buttery, crispy on top and silky, creamy underneath. This baked mac and cheese combines sharp cheddar, Gouda, Gruyère, and mozzarella for the perfect balance of flavor, richness, and that velvety, luscious texture we all want from a good mac and cheese. It's finished with a generous layer of seasoned Parmesan-panko breadcrumbs for a little crunch in every bite.

It's hard to reinvent the wheel with mac and cheese, so I took inspiration from two recipes I love and made my own version. A little sharpness from the cheddar, nuttiness from the Gruyère, creaminess from the Gouda, and mozzarella for that beautiful cheese pull.

A note about the recipe: In my video, you'll see me making a half batch since I was only cooking for two. The recipe below is the **full-size version**, perfect for a holiday gathering or a big family dinner. I also doubled the breadcrumb topping from what you see in the video because, after eating it, my only regret was not having MORE of that crispy, buttery crunch. Trust me on this one.

Prep Time: 25 minutes
Cook Time: 25–30 minutes
Total Time: Approximately 1 hour
Servings: 10–12
Oven Temperature: 375°F

Ingredients

Pasta & Cheese

- 1 lb cavatappi pasta
- 8 oz sharp cheddar cheese, freshly shredded
- 6 oz Gouda cheese, freshly shredded
- 4 oz Gruyère cheese, freshly shredded
- 6 oz low-moisture mozzarella cheese, freshly shredded

Creamy Cheese Sauce

- 6 tbsp unsalted butter
- 1 medium shallot, finely minced
- 3 garlic cloves, minced

- ⅓ cup all-purpose flour
- 3¾ cups whole milk (I used goat milk!)
- ¾ cup heavy cream
- 1 tsp Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- ½ tsp garlic powder
- ½ tsp onion powder
- ½ tsp freshly ground black pepper
- Salt, to taste

Crispy Parmesan-Panko Topping

This is double the breadcrumb topping shown in my video.

- 2 cups panko breadcrumbs
- 4 tbsp unsalted butter, melted
- ⅔ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- Pinch of salt and freshly ground black pepper

Garnish

- Freshly chopped chives

Instructions

1. Prep the cheese and pasta

Preheat your oven to 375°F and lightly butter a 9×13-inch baking dish or any similarly sized dish with approximately a 4-quart capacity.

Freshly shred your cheddar, Gouda, Gruyère, and mozzarella. Combine the cheeses in a large bowl, then set aside approximately 1½ cups for topping the mac and cheese.

Bring a large pot of generously salted water to a boil. Cook the cavatappi for 1–2 minutes less than the package instructions for al dente. The pasta will continue cooking in the oven, so you don't want it fully cooked at this stage.

Drain and set aside.

2. Make the roux

In a large saucepan or Dutch oven, melt 6 tablespoons of butter over medium heat.

Add the finely minced shallot and cook for approximately 2–3 minutes, until softened and fragrant.

Add the garlic and cook for another 30–60 seconds, stirring frequently.

Sprinkle in the flour and whisk continuously for 1–2 minutes to cook out the raw flour taste. The mixture should become a smooth, lightly golden paste. This is your roux!

3. Turn it into a béchamel

Slowly pour in the milk, whisking constantly to prevent lumps.

Add the heavy cream and continue whisking until smooth.

Allow the mixture to gently simmer for approximately 4–6 minutes, stirring frequently, until it begins to thicken and can lightly coat the back of a spatula.

You don't want it overly thick at this point.

4. Season and add the cheese

Stir in the Dijon mustard, smoked paprika, garlic powder, onion powder, black pepper, and salt to taste.

Turn off the heat completely and remove the saucepan from the burner.

Gradually add the shredded cheese (except the reserved 1½ cups), stirring between additions until completely melted and smooth. The residual heat from the béchamel will gently melt the cheese without overheating it.

Once the cheese is incorporated, you've technically made a Mornay sauce, which is just a béchamel with cheese added.

Here's the important part: Your cheese sauce should be silky, glossy, and slightly loose. When you lift your spatula, it should fall back into the pan in smooth, creamy ribbons.

If the sauce seems too thick, add another splash of milk, a little at a time, until you reach the right consistency.

Remember, the pasta will absorb some of the sauce and everything will thicken further as it bakes. Starting with a slightly looser sauce helps prevent a big dry block of mac and cheese.

5. Combine the pasta and cheese sauce

Add your cooked cavatappi to a large mixing bowl or directly into the pot of cheese sauce, if there's enough room.

Pour the sauce over the pasta and gently fold everything together until every little curve of pasta is coated.

It should look extra creamy and a little saucier than you think it needs to be.

6. Assemble the mac and cheese

Transfer all of the mac and cheese mixture into your prepared baking dish, spreading it into an even layer.

Sprinkle the reserved shredded cheese evenly over the top.

7. Make the crispy Parmesan breadcrumb topping

In a small bowl, combine the panko breadcrumbs, melted butter, freshly grated Parmesan, smoked paprika, and a pinch of salt and pepper.

Mix until the breadcrumbs are evenly coated.

Sprinkle the mixture generously over the entire surface of your mac and cheese.

Don't be shy here! The contrast between the creamy pasta and crispy, buttery topping is one of the best parts.

8. Bake until golden and bubbling

Bake uncovered at 375°F for approximately 20–25 minutes, or until the cheese is bubbling around the edges and the breadcrumb topping is deeply golden.

If, for some reason (everyone's ovens are different!), the top isn't crispy enough at this point, broil for the final 1–2 minutes, watching carefully so the breadcrumbs don't burn.

The top should be golden and crunchy, and the cheese underneath should still be molten and creamy.

9. Rest, garnish, and serve

Allow the mac and cheese to rest for 5–10 minutes before serving. This gives the sauce a chance to settle slightly without losing that gooey texture.

Finish with freshly chopped chives for a little color and freshness.

Serve warm.

Recipe Notes & Tips

Freshly grate your cheese. Pre-shredded cheeses often contain anti-caking ingredients that can interfere with how smoothly they melt. Grating your own makes a noticeable difference in the sauce's texture.

Don't overcook the pasta. Slightly undercooking it before baking prevents mushy mac and cheese.

Keep your cheese sauce loose. If it looks too thick before you mix in the pasta, add another splash of milk. The pasta will absorb some of the liquid as it bakes.

Turn off the heat before adding cheese. High heat can cause cheese sauces to separate or become grainy. Once your béchamel has thickened, turn off the heat and remove the pan from the burner before gradually stirring in your shredded cheese. The residual heat should be enough to melt everything into a smooth, silky sauce.

About the milk: I used goat milk because I've been loving it lately, but regular whole milk works perfectly. You can also adjust the balance of milk and cream depending on how rich you want your sauce.

Double the breadcrumbs, double the fun. The topping quantities in this recipe are intentionally doubled from what I made in the video. If you prefer a thinner breadcrumb crust, you can halve those ingredients.

Making a half batch: If you're cooking for a smaller group, halve all the ingredients and use a smaller baking dish, approximately 2-quart capacity. This is the portion you'll see me preparing in the video, although I recommend keeping a generous amount of breadcrumbs regardless.

Make-ahead tip: You can assemble the mac and cheese ahead of time and refrigerate it before baking. For the best texture, keep the breadcrumb topping separate until you're ready to bake. Refrigerated mac and cheese may require additional oven time.

Serving Suggestions

This mac and cheese is rich enough to be the star of the meal but makes an incredible holiday side dish alongside roasted turkey, chicken, braised meats, or your favorite Thanksgiving vegetables.

I served mine with a juicy piece of chicken, but you can imagine how good this would be next to Thanksgiving turkey.

And whatever you do, don't forget the chives. I almost did because I was too distracted by the mac and cheese itself hehe.