

# Mac & Cheese

BY MIKE HIGGINS

A while ago I made a macaroni and cheese casserole. Karen usually does this dish and all I usually do is taste and add some seasonings at critical points. This time I got to do it all. That's because I read an article in the *New York Times* on "Mac & Cheese" (making me an instant expert!), and I was challenged and inspired to go where I have never been.

The *Times* article cited a 20-year-old book by John Thorne: "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."

"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," Thorne said. "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." Mr. Thorne's recipe is a step in the right direction—it combines a whole pound of cheddar cheese with half a pound of macaroni.

More from the *Times*: 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 Spieler 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."

I am fortunate to have a sinfully sufficient supply of cheese. Some cheddar types available for my mac & cheese include: Sonoma Bear Flag brand aged Dry Jack; Cabot Vermont Extra Sharp (white) Cheddar; Bandon's Full Cream Extra Sharp (white) Cheddar (Tillamook, Oregon); Joseph Farms Extra Sharp Black Label Premium Cheddar Cheese, aged over three years (California); Tillamook Vintage White Extra Sharp Cheddar Cheese, aged over two years (Tillamook, Oregon); and Tillamook Special Reserve Extra Sharp Natural Cheddar Cheese, aged over 15 months (Tillamook, Oregon).

For a salty bite, I have some Cello brand Pecorino Romano, aged over nine months (Italy). For a mellow richness, I could include some aged Stella Asiago (Wisconsin).

I also have something called "Kerrygold brand 100% natural," a cheddar-like cheese from Ireland that is rich but mellow. The package indicates "Aged Cheese with a Distinctive Taste and a Natural Hint of Sweetness." I think the suggestion of sweetness comes

from its rather low acidity. I will buy more of this pale golden cheese from Costco. (Support the tribe.)

The *Times* article goes on to mention a peppery, Caribbean style "macaroni pie" that has its roots back to times when genuine cheddars were brought in by boat from England, Australia, and New Zealand. I always add some cayenne to the béchamel sauce.

Béchamel sauce was presumably invented by Louis de Béchamel, Marquis of Nointel, Grand Chamberlain of King Louis XIV. Except for the addition of nutmeg, this white sauce must have been around forever.

Julia Moskin, who wrote the article, tells how surprised she was by a recipe that called for dry, uncooked elbow macaroni. As the dish baked, the pasta cooked up well and absorbed lots of flavor. That's a brave new way, but I decided to just shorten the cooking time on the pasta. Moskin advises, "When in doubt, add more cheese."

Since I have some really flavorful chunks (what's the difference between hunk and chunk?) of ham, left over from a braised shank of *Gusto's Brand* ham, I buried some pieces in the casserole. That's a legal variation.

As it came out of the oven, my mac & cheese was golden brown and crusty on top, dangerously bubbling and hot, and intensely cheesy and creamy throughout. And I ate the experiment. And it was good!

After much pondering, I made the béchamel sauce (including nutmeg and cayenne) with heavy cream and half-and-half, loaded with three types of cheese: Tillamook Special Reserve Extra Sharp Natural Cheddar Cheese, Cabot Vermont Extra Sharp (white) Cheddar, and my last hunk of *Dubliner*.

I chickened out on using uncooked elbow macaroni, but did way undercook it. I also used less béchamel sauce, but the load of cheese melted and made it plenty moist when I baked it at 375 degrees. After about 35 minutes, I pulled it out and topped it with more Tillamook for extra color, and put it back in for five minutes.

Karen said it was too dry, but she liked the flavor and the crispy pasta. It was not as creamy as hers, but did have nicely browned and crunchy pasta. And lots of flavor, what with the *Gusto* ham chunks buried below the surface. I thought it was the best-ever mac & cheese.

The swelling, undercooked pasta may have absorbed some of the liquid and allowed the top to get properly crispy. Also, I used a large ceramic baking dish rather than a deep *Corning Ware* type so there was lots of surface to get golden brown. And I used convection for at least 15 minutes.

Before deciding how to proceed, I checked out the Betty Crocker recipe. The inclusion of a little mustard and *Worcestershire* is traditional, but that would not make sense with a true béchamel sauce with nutmeg. More significant is Betty's wimpy ratio of two cups milk to two cups cheese. Betty works for General Mills, which don't do cheese. (Yoplait yogurt is not cheese.)

Betty bakes hers at 350 degrees for

only 20 to 25 minutes "or until bubbly," not likely to create the type of crust I prefer.

The food business fascinates me. Most of the brands we see in supermarkets are owned by oligopolies like General Mills, Nestlé, Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Kraft, Unilever, Vargil, Tyson, ConAgra, etc. Sometimes they get together and fix prices (ADM) or otherwise rig the market. Generally, they are very ingenious and always looking for new ways and new places to sell products.

General Mills is now the world's No. 5 food company, and No. 3 in the United States with gross annual revenues of \$11.1 billion. General Mills recently put Betty Crocker to work on a book for Hispanics in the U.S. called "Cocina Betty Crocker: Favorite American Recipes in Spanish and English." In that book, next to Betty's instructions for Macaroni and Cheese, are directions for *Macarrones con Queso*. Can you imagine that?

General Mills owns Old El Paso brand, and that website also features a "Mexican Macaroni and Cheese" dish, which calls for radiatore pasta (which is not macaroni!), red bell pepper, olives, and a can of Old El Paso chopped green chilies. (Betty suggested using American cheese.)

The food business is complicated. General Mills owns Haagen-Dazs. But sales of Haagen-Dazs are managed in the U.S. by Dreyer's, which is owned (majority interest) by Nestlé.

Dreyer's is the No. 1 ice cream manufacturer in the U.S. Following a merger with the local ice cream interests of food giant Nestlé in 2002, Dreyer's now manages Dreyer's and Edy's, and super-premium Starbucks ice cream and Haagen-Dazs. Of course, Haagen-Dazs is not really Scandinavian, but a name thought up by its creator, Reuben Martus.

Nestlé is the world's biggest food manufacturer, with well over 500 factories in 85 countries, and a portfolio that ranges from baby foods to pet care, from chocolate to mineral water. It grosses \$33.8 billion annually in the U.S., and \$81.6 worldwide.

ADM is listed as No. 2 in the world, with \$36.2 billion in food sales. ADM owns brands like *Armour*, *Cooks*, *Butterball*, *Libby's*, *Hunts*, *Wesson*, and dozens more. The entire company does about \$500 billion per year, including food products, animal feeds, and industrial products (gasohol, non-petroleum oils, solvents and emulsifiers, plastics, and starches). They are organized so that many ADM facilities produce products in all three sectors using the same raw ingredients.

## ADM's Food products:

**Acidulants**—Lactic acid and citric acid are used for a wide range of food products for adjusting acid balance and killing bacteria.

**Baking aids**—For industrial bakers, ADM provides sweeteners, baking powder, yeast foods, dough conditioners, dry honey and molasses, and other baking products.

**Cocoa**—ADM is the largest cocoa processor in the world (beating out Cargill).

**Emulsifiers and stabilizers**—lecithin, starches, and xanthan gum, which are used by food manufacturers to adjust texture and freshness.

**Flour**—Custom-milled flours for manufacturing breads, cakes, tortilla, etc. ADM is the No. 1 milling company in the U.S.

**Nutritional additives**—Vitamin E, choline, soy dietary supplements (isoflavones), and soluble fiber.

**Oils and fats**—ADM is the No. 1 cooking oil company in the world, and makes shortening and margarine.

**Protein**—Soy and wheat proteins, which are added to a number of food products used in meat substitutes, soy milk, protein bars, and other foods.

**Sweeteners**—Corn syrups, maltodextrin, dextrose, fructose, and others used in food manufacturing (No. 1 over Cargill).

ConAgra is the No. 2 U.S. food company \$14.5 billion in annual revenue, and No. 4 in the world. The company does a worldwide total of \$20 billion annually, much of it raw food materials (grain products), cattle and hog feed, and poultry. ConAgra also owns 48% of Swift & Co. ConAgra is the largest U.S. supplier to food services and restaurants.

ADM is subsidized by a great deal of corporate welfare. James Bovard of the Cato Institute wrote about it: "The Archer Daniels Midland Corporation (ADM) has been the most prominent recipient of corporate welfare in recent U.S. history. ADM and its chairman Dwayne Andreas have lavishly fertilized both political parties with millions of dollars in handouts and, in return, have reaped billion-dollar windfalls from taxpayers and consumers. Thanks to federal protection of the domestic sugar industry, ethanol subsidies, subsidized grain exports, and various other programs, ADM has cost the American economy billions of dollars since 1980 and has indirectly cost Americans tens of billions of dollars in higher prices and higher taxes over that same period. At least 43 percent of ADM's annual profits are from products heavily subsidized or protected by the American government. Moreover, every \$1 of profits earned by ADM's corn sweetener operation costs consumers \$10, and every \$1 of profits earned by its ethanol operation costs taxpayers \$30." For Bovard's entire article, see <http://www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa-241.html>.

In 1997 General Mills entered into a joint venture in China with Want Want Holdings, Ltd., a producer of snacks and beverages. Their brands are Hot Kid and Want Want. General Mills bought Pillsbury in 2001, which had owned Wanchai Ferry noodles and wantons. The key product in China was the Wanchai Ferry refrigerated dumpling (think Pillsbury biscuits).

General Mills now has about 3,600 employees in China and runs 50 Haagen-Dazs cafes, where richer Chinese spend \$9 for a pint of ice cream.

Wot's it all mean? Betty Crocker pushes her mac & cheese recipe because it uses one-quarter cup of Gold Medal flour. She promotes her Mexican Macaroni and Cheese (no flour) because it uses a small can of Old El Paso green chilies. What will Betty do to sell mac & cheese in China?

I'm going to work on a mac & cheese recipe using Wanchai Ferry dumplings, white sauce using Gold Medal Flour, topped with Want Want rice crackers y queso. Yum yum!

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