

Trend Of Unusual, Gourmet Mac & Cheese Boosts Specialty Cheese Sales As Ingredients

Madison—A growing trend of gourmet macaroni and cheese entices consumers to create epicurean versions of the traditional American dish using specialty cheese varieties.

Over the past five years, mac n' cheese recipe contests have exploded with entries, restaurants have been created to exclusively offer unique and opulent versions of the entree, and online cooking websites are jammed with unusual formulas for mac 'n cheese using every cheese from Blue to Brie.

Searching for mac 'n cheese recipes on FoodNetwork.com produces a whopping 221 different results from the network's stable of star chefs.

Recipes on Epicurious.com, whose partners include *Gourmet* and *Bon Appetit*, total almost 40, among which include curried, lobster, spicy, Wisconsin and "upscale" configurations.

"...restaurants are starting to experiment with different varieties of mac and cheese, and the customers are responding,"

—Sarita Ekya, S'MAC (Sarita's Macaroni & Cheese)

S'MAC (Sarita's Macaroni & Cheese) of New York's Greenwich Village opened its doors in June 2006, offering customers more than 10 variations on the traditional comfort dish.

Owner Sarita Ekya said only 20 percent of her customers opt for classic mac and cheese, and almost all of the restaurant's exclusive varieties sell equally across the board.

All menu options can be served with regular, whole-grain or gluten-free elbow macaroni – with or without bread crumbs.

S'MAC's bill of fare ranges from All-American Mac & Cheese with a blend of American and Cheddar; 4-Cheese with Cheddar, Muenster, Gruyere and Pecorino; La Mancha with Manchego; Garden Lite with Light Cheddar and Parmesan; Neapolitana using fresh Mozzarella; and Parisienne – a mac and cheese for the "upper crust" with a blend of Brie, roasted figs, roasted shiitake mushrooms and fresh rosemary.

"I think people have always been interested in unique takes on mac and cheese, as so many of our customers tell us how they make theirs at home and it usually has some kind of spin to it," Ekya said.

"The difference now is that restaurants are starting to experiment with different varieties of mac and cheese, and the customers are responding," Ekya continued.

While most diners at S'MAC

view mac and cheese as a comfort food, they typically don't characterize it as "a comfort food that can only be eaten once in a while," Ekya said.

Most people realize that it's not a low-calorie dish, Ekya said. But they seem more concerned about the source of the food and how fresh it is.

"Everything that goes into our mac and cheese is made daily, and we don't use any type of preservatives," Ekya said. "People seem to be more interested in that an calorie counts."

'Flavor Per Calorie' Is True Measure Of Comfort: Beecher's 'World's Best'

It's true that some customers are concerned about the calorie content of mac n' cheese, but the dish is also high in "flavor per calorie," which is the real measure of comfort, according to Kurt Dammeier, owner of Seattle's Beecher's Handmade Cheese and maker of the "World's Best" mac n' cheese.

Beecher's "World's Best" mac n' cheese is sampled continuously at its Pike Place Market retail store.

"After many months of people telling us it's the best they ever tasted, we started asking them if it was the world's best," Dammeier said.

More than 95 percent of customers agreed the moniker was correct, he said.

"Since it is self-proclaimed, we put quotes around the name," Dammeier continued. "Kind of tongue-in-cheek."

Gourmet retailer Dean & DeLuca offers its "World's Best" mac n' cheese through the company's website. Shipped frozen, the 20-ounce portion is made with penne pasta and artisan Flagship and Just Jack cheeses from Seattle's Beecher's Handmade Cheese.

Dean & DeLuca's "Mariachi" variety is made with penne pasta, Flagship and Just Jack cheeses, plus roasted Anaheim chiles, cauliflower, red onion, corn and red bell pepper.

Dammeier attributes growing enthusiasm for gourmet mac n' cheese to increased general interest in all things "cheese," and said he believes the trend is here to stay.

S'MAC's Sarita Ekya agreed that the unique combinations definitely have staying power.

"People have been experimenting with mac and cheese in their kitchens at home for years," she said. "It doesn't mean they will stop eating traditional style mac, but when the craving hits – whichever one does the trick will be eaten."

Contests Help Boost Cheese Sales

Now in its fifth year, the Tillamook Macaroni & Cheese Recipe Contest is the biggest yet, growing through word-of-mouth and media attention, said Tillamook spokesperson Ashley Sherrick.

The 2008 contest inspired more than 2,000 recipe entries, with the



A sample skillet at Greenwich Village's S'MAC restaurant features eight unique mac n' cheese creations using cheese from Cheddar to Brie: All-American, 4 Cheese, Cheeseburger, La Mancha, Cajun, Neapolitana, Alpine and Parisienne.

top prize in the grand finale cook-off going to Angie Phillips of Tarzana, CA, for her "Caramelized Sweet Potato, Garlic and Rosemary Macaroni & Cheese."

New to the 2008 contest was a "People's Choice" voting campaign where consumers voted online for their favorite mac 'n cheese from six semi-finalists' recipes. The "People's Choice" winner for 2008 was Melissa

LaCaille of Kirkland, WA, for her "Cornbread Topped Apple Macaroni & Cheese."

Tapping into the growing online consumer base has helped increase awareness of the contest, Sherrick said.

"Past contest submitters, participants and winners have been strong

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ambassadors for the contest, talking about their experience on blogs, discussion boards, and food and recipe contest websites," she said.

After discovering the large number of people who support Tillamook cheese via online platforms, the company extended its marketing efforts to fans on Facebook, Sherrick said.

Tillamook created the Macaroni & Cheese Recipe Contest group on Facebook, as well as the Tillamook Cheese Fan page, which were key in helping drive submissions in the 2008 contest and attract attendees to the grand finale cook-off event, she continued.

A number of recipe trends have been noted over the years, Sherrick said. Most of the time, we can tell in what region a recipe was created based solely on ingredients.

In the Pacific Northwest, we see a lot of recipes using seafood – shrimp, scallops, salmon and crab, she said. East toward Denver, Chicago and Texas, we see recipes with a Southwest influence, as well as recipes with a focus on meats like beef, sausage, chicken and big game like buffalo.

"Every year, numerous Mediterranean recipes are submitted, but the most popular ingredient used in entries is shrimp or crab," Sherrick said. "It seems like every person has a version of macaroni and cheese that incorporates some kind of shellfish or seafood."

In February, celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse hosted his Best Mac 'n' Cheese Ever Challenge via ABC's "Good Morning America."

Winner Laura Macek was chosen among thousands of entries with her decadent Cavatappi, Gruyere and Cheddar creation, using ingredients

like grated Parmigiano Reggiano, Applewood smoked bacon and a pinch of nutmeg.

Mac Of The Month

Good Tastes Kitchen – www.good-tastes.com – is a meal delivery and catering company for Boston's North Shore which offers three, six and 12-month memberships to its Mac & Cheese of the Month Club – a.k.a. "Bliss in the Mail."

Among the company's seasonal selection of gourmet mac and cheese entrees are Black Truffle Mac & Cheese, Mediterranean Mac & Cheese, Penne with Five Cheeses, Cajun Mac & Cheese, Pancetta & Pea, All American Mac & Cheese, Caprese Mac, and Wild Mushroom Three Cheese Mac & Cheese.

There is nothing more classic than a great mac 'n cheese, said Sarah Pike, owner of Good Tastes Kitchen.

"However, many of our customers have never experienced anything except the 'orange stuff' and it has been a delight to explore the possibilities with this wonderful dish," Pike said.

Good Tastes Kitchen creates a new gourmet flavor each month, with personal favorites rotating with every new addition. All have been well received, Pike said, with top sellers being the Brie & Fig, Black Truffle & Pea, Mediterranean Mac and the Fondue Mac.

Pike said her preferred flavor is the Five Cheese Mac & Cheese.

"While this might not be the most traditional Mac, there is something to be said for a Mac that is a blend of perfectly cooked pasta and the right ratios of cheese sauce and bread crumbs," she said.

As for the company's more inventive flavor combinations, Pike said Good Tastes focuses on making sure the macs are a mix of ingredients that will stand the test of time and



delight people regardless of their perceptions of what mac 'n cheese "should" be.

"The ice cream industry has revealed that people enjoy interesting ingredient combinations beyond what we consider 'traditional' and 'good'," Pike said. "And it's my mission to do the same for this fabulous dish."

The monthly club enjoys a strong following both locally and nationally. Along with nearby retail customers, Good Tastes Kitchen recently began wholesaling its gourmet mac 'n cheese.

"For now, the Mac of the Month Club is split between people who purchased it for themselves and also have given it as a gift – the package that we ship it in looks like it could go to the moon and back," Pike said.

Fortunately, the company has had little concern voiced regarding the calorie content of its gourmet mac 'n cheese.

"It is clearly something enjoyed best in moderation, but the response

has been more gleeful appreciation," Pike said. "Much like good ice cream, it is such a pleasure to experience something like this with the best possible ingredients and attention to preparation."

"Macaroni and cheese is so simple, can be cooked in a variety of ways, and is also the ultimate comfort food – especially during this tough economic time."

—Ashley Sherrick,
Tillamook Cheese

The trend for upscale, artisan macaroni and cheese "will definitely continue to evolve," said Tillamook's Ashley Sherrick.

"Macaroni and cheese is so simple, can be cooked in a variety of ways, and is also the ultimate comfort food – especially during this tough economic time," she said.

The trend for gourmet mac 'n cheese can also help artisan cheese makers because it influences consumers to experiment while cooking with different cheese varieties and products, Sherrick said.

"The trend also entices consumers to create epicurean versions of the traditional American dish," she continued. r



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