

From The Kitchen at St. Francis Friary, Los Angeles

Every morning after our daily Eucharist at the friary, after any guests have gone, the friars gather for Morning Chapter where we pray for our community worldwide, read from the Rule and Principles of the Order, offer thanks or apologies, and review the day's schedule from the house calendar. I'm usually pretty good about looking at the calendar at the beginning of each week so I know what's coming up for me, but every so often (more often than not, these days) it slips my mind.

Yesterday was one of those days. I had forgotten that I was on deck to cook dinner. So I started to wander around the kitchen to see if any ideas would come up. I knew that I had a LOT of reading to do for school, and I had to work on the books at the parish, so I needed something quick and that I could do in stages if I had to.

I opened one cabinet and literally a bag of macaroni fell into my hands. It's one of those odd things about the Food Bank: the type of food varies, but often you'll get a lot of one thing for weeks in a row, then you won't see that item for months. Lately we've had a LOT of pasta – elbow macaroni, corkscrews, farfalle. It had sort of registered with me that we were slowly stockpiling a bunch of these bags of pasta but I hadn't noticed before that really no one in the house was cooking with it. We've been having lots of rice and beans, and spaghetti that often goes on sale at the local market, but not these other shapes of pasta. So I decided to resurrect a dish I hadn't made since I was a first-year novice and that Br. Richard, our Novice Guardian, requested for his birthday.

So here's my version of Macaroni & Cheese. And not to toot my own horn, but Br. Ambrose happened to say over dinner that it was probably the best mac & cheese he had ever eaten. I'm not entirely sure whether that says more about the depth of his experiences with mac & cheese or my culinary ability, but I'm choosing to believe that this is actually a really great version....

Baked Macaroni & Cheese

Cook 12 ounces of elbow macaroni (or any small shaped pasta), drain and reserve.

Melt 1 Tablespoon of unsalted butter in a small skillet or pan, remove from heat, and toss in ½ cup of fresh bread crumbs to coat. (I have also used Panko,

Japanese-style breadcrumbs for this.) Stir in one Tablespoon of chopped fresh parsley and reserve this mixture.

In a large pot over a medium-high flame heat 1 Tablespoon of oil and sauté for about five minutes $\frac{1}{2}$ an onion that has been finely minced and one clove garlic, also minced.

Push the onion and garlic to the sides of the pan, reduce heat to medium, and drop 4 Tablespoons of unsalted butter into the middle of the pan. When that's melted whisk in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of all-purpose flour and cook for about 2 minutes to make a light roux. Then whisk in:

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of dried thyme
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of paprika
a pinch of cayenne
a pinch of white pepper
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of dry mustard

Cook this, whisking, for another minute to develop the spices. Then whisk in:

3 cups milk, one cup at a time
1 bay leaf
a few gratings of fresh nutmeg
1 teaspoon of salt
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon of black pepper

Bring this to a boil, whisking constantly to ensure that the roux has completely dissolved into the milk. Once it boils and has thickened, reduce the heat to low and simmer your béchamel sauce for 10 minutes, whisking periodically.

Meanwhile, grate 10 ounces of sharp cheddar cheese. (This should make roughly 3 cups.) When the béchamel is done, remove the bay leaf and stir in 2 cups of the cheese until melted. Then stir in the reserved macaroni, mixing well.

Transfer half of this to a buttered 2-quart dish. (I prefer a dish that is really wide so you get a nice ratio of crusty top to creamy mac.) Sprinkle on half of the remaining cheese and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of grated Parmesan cheese. (Real parmiggiano-reggiano is best, but more often than not I do in fact use the stuff in a jar.) Add the remaining half of the macaroni and spread evenly. Sprinkle the remainder of the

cheese and ¼ cup more Parmesan all over the top. Finally sprinkle on the reserved breadcrumb mixture.

Bake the casserole in a preheated 375 degree Fahrenheit oven for about 25-30 minutes until the topping is browned and the mixture is bubbling. Allow to cool at least 10 minutes before serving. (I generally serve a really big salad on the side so that it feels like I'm balancing the richness of this casserole.)

This recipe served 4 hungry friars, but I'm sure would feed 6 normal folks.

~ Br. Simon