

PERFECT MACARONI AND CHEESE

You can easily divide this recipe in half; use a 1 1/2-quart casserole dish if you do.

Serves 12

6 slices good-quality white bread, crusts removed, torn into 1/4- to 1/2-inch pieces

8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, plus more for dish

5 1/2 cups milk

1/2 cup all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons kosher salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper

4 1/2 cups (about 18 ounces) grated sharp white cheddar

2 cups (about 8 ounces) grated Gruyere or 1 1/4 cups (about 5 ounces) grated pecorino Romano

1 pound elbow macaroni

1. Heat the oven to 375 degrees. Butter a 3-quart casserole dish; set aside. Place bread pieces in a medium bowl. In a small saucepan over medium heat, melt 2 tablespoons butter. Pour butter into the bowl with bread, and toss. Set the breadcrumbs aside. In a medium saucepan set over medium heat, heat milk. Melt remaining 6 tablespoons butter in a high-sided skillet over medium heat. When butter bubbles, add flour. Cook, stirring, 1 minute.
2. Slowly pour hot milk into flour-butter mixture while whisking. Continue cooking, whisking constantly, until the mixture bubbles and becomes thick.
3. Remove the pan from the heat. Stir in salt, nutmeg, black pepper, cayenne pepper, 3 cups cheddar, and 1 1/2 cups Gruyere or 1 cup pecorino Romano. Set cheese sauce aside.
4. Fill a large saucepan with water. Bring to a boil. Add macaroni; cook 2 to 3 fewer minutes than manufacturer's directions, until outside of pasta is cooked and inside is underdone. (Different brands of macaroni cook at different rates; be sure to read the instructions.) Transfer the macaroni to a colander, rinse under cold running water, and drain well. Stir macaroni into the reserved cheese sauce.
5. Pour the mixture into the prepared casserole dish. Sprinkle remaining 1 1/2 cups cheddar and 1/2 cup Gruyere or 1/4 cup pecorino Romano; scatter breadcrumbs over the top. Bake until browned on top, about 30 minutes. Transfer dish to a wire rack to cool for 5 minutes; serve.