

Better Than Boxed: Homemade Chili Mac and Cheese with Real Ingredients

The Ultimate One-Pot Chili Mac and Cheese: The Only Comfort Food Recipe You Need



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30 min

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INGREDIENTS

1 lb Ground Beef or Turkey: I prefer 85/15 lean ground beef for flavor, but turkey works great for a lighter version.

1 Small Onion & 3 Garlic Cloves: The aromatic base.

2 tbsp Olive Oil: For sautéing.

1 can (15 oz) Black or Kidney Beans: Rinsed and drained.

1 can (15 oz) Diced Tomatoes: Do not drain these; the juices are part of the cooking liquid!

2 cups Beef or Vegetable Broth: Adds much more flavor than plain water.

2 cups Elbow Macaroni: The classic shape for trapping cheese.

The Spice Blend: 2 tbsp chili powder, 1 tsp smoked paprika, 1 tsp cumin, salt, and pepper.

The Cheese: 1 cup sharp Cheddar and 1 cup Monterey Jack for that perfect melt.

Toppings: Sour cream, green onions, or even crushed chips.

DIRECTIONS

- 1. Sauté the Aromatics:** Heat the olive oil in a large pot or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add your diced onion and minced garlic. Cook for about 3-5 minutes until the onions are translucent and fragrant.
- 2. Brown the Meat:** Add the ground beef (or turkey) to the pot. Season generously with salt and pepper. Use a wooden spoon to break the meat into small crumbles. Cook until no pink remains, then drain off any excess fat.
- 3. Toast the Spices:** Stir in the chili powder, smoked paprika, and cumin. Let them cook with the meat for about 60 seconds; this "blossoms" the spices and intensifies the flavor.
- 4. Simmer:** Pour in the undrained diced tomatoes, the beans, and the broth. Stir to combine and bring the mixture to a gentle simmer.
- 5. Cook the Pasta:** Add the dry elbow macaroni directly into the pot. Stir well to ensure the pasta is submerged. Cover the pot and cook for 10-12 minutes. Be sure to stir occasionally so the pasta doesn't stick to the bottom.
- 6. Cheesy Finish:** Once the pasta is tender and most of the liquid has been absorbed into a thick sauce, remove the pot from the heat. Stir in the Cheddar and Monterey Jack cheeses until completely melted and creamy.
- 7. Serve:** Ladle into big bowls and top with a dollop of sour cream.

SWAPS & NOTES

The Pasta: While elbow macaroni is traditional, shells or cavatappi work beautifully because they hold onto the beans and meat.

The Heat: If you like it spicy, add a diced jalapeño with the onions or a dash of cayenne pepper.

Vegetarian Option: Swap the meat for a plant-based crumble or extra beans, and use vegetable broth.

The Liquid: If the pasta absorbs the liquid too quickly, don't be afraid to splash in an extra 1/4 cup of broth toward the end of the cooking time.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Don't Overcook the Pasta: Start checking the macaroni around the 9-minute mark.

You want it al dente because it will continue to soften slightly in the hot cheese sauce.

Grate Your Own Cheese: Pre-shredded cheese is coated in potato starch to prevent clumping, which can make your sauce grainy.

Grating a block of cheese by hand ensures a much smoother melt.

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