

# ASPEN'S OBSESSION *with* MAC-AND-CHEESE

THIS COMFORT FOOD IS A STAPLE ON MENUS ALL OVER TOWN

by LAUREN GLENDENING

*macaroni*



*bacon*



*breadcrumbs*



*mushrooms*



*parmesan*



*jalepenos*



YOU SIT DOWN at one of Aspen's world-class restaurants and peruse the menu — choices include quality products like Colorado rack of lamb, Kobe beef, caviar, foie gras and ... mac-and-cheese?

Mac-and-cheese is on just about every menu in town, and it's a far cry from the boxed Kraft version. It's a foolproof dish to warm you up on the inside when everything is so cold outside.

But in a place like Aspen, how is it that mac-and-cheese has become *the* thing?

"I think it's nostalgic, said David Viviano, execu-

tive chef at the St. Regis Aspen Resort. "How could you not love it? It's comforting, it's warm, it's got all this cheese in it — it's delicious."

Viviano is the reigning champ of the Aspen Mac & Cheese Festival, which just marked its fourth year in September. His menu at the St. Regis's Trecento Quindici Decano didn't offer mac-and-cheese at the time, so he created a dish just for the festival: Homemade agnolotti pasta stuffed with a Parmesan mornay sauce, tossed in truffle butter and finished with bread crumbs.

"We wanted to take that traditional mac-and-cheese and elevate it and make it high-end," Viviano said. "It was pretty killer."

So killer that it's making its way onto the menu at the St. Regis this winter. Viviano loves the idea of a classed-up mac-and-cheese on the menu — it's nostalgic for him as a chef just as much as it is for the guest. Viviano grew up in an Italian house and always had noodles and Parmesan cheese around. It's one of the first dishes he remembers making as a kid.

"I think all chefs do secretly love mac-and-cheese. They secretly love. I wouldn't really call it lowbrow food, but they like burgers, fries, pizza — more pedestrian-type food. I would wager to say a lot of chefs, one of the first things they made was mac-and-cheese," he said.

It was one of the first things on the menu at Rustique when it opened in 2000, said owner Rob Ittner, whose former partner and chef, Charles Dale, created the version that still lives on the menu today. Rustique won the first three titles at the Aspen Mac & Cheese Festival, and took second at the fourth round last September.

Dale, now a chef at a restaurant in Santa Fe, grew up in the south of France and created a very rustic, country version of mac-and-cheese for Rustique. Ittner said the recipe stems from a tradition in the region in

which people would save cheese ends for weeks and would then render them down and mix with a béchamel sauce to make the Mornay sauce.

"It was a very old, traditional, leftover poor man's dish in the south of France," Ittner said.

Rustique's version also borrows its earthy component from a nearby region in Italy where truffles grow. The mac-and-cheese features roasted mushrooms and truffle oil, finished off with a gratin of Gruyere and Parmesan cheeses, and breadcrumbs.



📷 The mac-and-cheese at the St. Regis's Trecento-Quindici-Decano features homemade agnollette pasta stuffed with a parmesan mornay sauce, tossed in truffle butter and finished with bread crumbs.



"It becomes a little more refined, a little more Aspen-esque," Ittner said, adding that customers were "up in arms" about 10 years ago when they took it off the menu for a couple of months.

A few doors down and up a flight of stairs is Jimmy's, a restaurant serving up a seemingly simplistic version of mac-and-cheese, but just like the others, it's elevated to a more Aspen-appropriate dish.

Known as Jimmy Mac and offered as an \$8 side dish, this is a dish that resembles the mac from your childhood memories. The crispy bacon and freshly diced jalapenos add a little something, but the end result is a creamy, but not overly so, mac with a subtle kick from the jalapenos and smoky bacon undertones. There's an almost-burnt cheesy crust — made with Parmesan, breadcrumbs and cheddar cheese — melted over the top of it for an extra layer of comfort. The recipe is even featured on the restaurant's website due to its popularity.

With a trend like mac-and-cheese seemingly here to stay, some chefs are taking their mac offerings a step further. Some restaurants offer variations — Finbarr's, for example, offers a mac of the day with inventive combinations like chorizo, sweet corn and green chilies.

And at Hops Culture, a new craft beer restaurant on Hyman Avenue, there's a section of the menu devoted to mac-and-cheese.

Chef Sarah Helsley created two of the more nostalgic macs for the menu — a smoked gouda and white cheddar version, one offered with the addition of smoky Tender Belly bacon — but she took this comfort food out of her comfort zone with three other creative versions: crispy leek mac with spaetzle noodles, fried shallots and gruyere fondue; a jalapeno popper mac with bacon and cream cheese; and a miso mac, which is gluten free and vegan.

How can a creamy, comforting dish like mac-and-cheese possibly be satisfying as a vegan, gluten-free dish? Helsley figured out a way.

The tofu is used for creaminess, while peas and sundried tomatoes add texture and shitake mushrooms add the umami flavor. It's remarkably tasty for a dish that lacks so many of the very components that make mac-and-cheese so tasty.

That's the exciting thing about mac-and-cheese in Aspen — no two versions are the same. Cache Cache serves up an appetizer riccioletti with three cheeses, savory herbs and truffle oil and a ricotta crust; Ajax Tavern serves an après snack version from its small plates menu, while Steak House

No. 316 serves a la cart side versions — one with lobster — to accompany steaks. There's no way to list every restaurant in town that serves it because there are just so many chefs doing it.

It's that kind of creativity that keeps Keith Bulicz, creator of the Mac & Cheese festival, so excited about his all-time favorite food. If there's a mac on the menu, Bulicz is ordering it — he just can't help himself. "Who would have thought — with the glitz and glamour in Aspen and the reputation we have for that — that one of the simplest comfort foods in the world would be a staple in Aspen," Bulicz said. "Aspen could become, per capita, the mac-n-cheese capital of the country. When I think about it, I have a silly grin on my face because it's really quite amazing it's gotten to where it is now."

**BELOW** Photo courtesy of C2 Photography, Aspen. The jalapeno popper mac-n-cheese at Hops Culture features bacon and cream cheese.

