

Creamy Cauliflower Mac

Makes: 4 servings Time: About 45 minutes **M**

Vegetables are comfort food too, as proved by this recipe, which is sure to please anyone who loves mac-and-cheese. The “secret” is cauliflower’s miraculous ability to turn creamy when puréed. If you don’t want to wash out a blender or food processor (and don’t mind some lumps), use a potato masher to purée the cauliflower in the same pot you cooked it in. The main recipe is quite saucy; for a less smooth texture, try the variation.

2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for greasing the baking dish

Salt

2½ cups vegetable or chicken stock (for homemade, see pages 135 to 140)
or water

2 bay leaves

1 cauliflower, cored and separated into large pieces

8 ounces elbow, shell, ziti, or other cut pasta, preferably whole wheat

½ cup grated cheese (like sharp cheddar, Gruyère, or Emmental or a combination)

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard, or to taste

⅛ teaspoon nutmeg, or to taste

Black pepper

¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese

½ cup or more bread crumbs, preferably whole grain and homemade, optional

1. Heat the oven to 400°F. Grease a 9-inch square baking dish with a little oil. Bring a large pot of water to a boil and salt it. Put the stock with the bay leaves in a small saucepan over medium-low heat. When small bubbles appear along the sides, about 5 minutes later, turn off the heat and let stand.
2. Cook the cauliflower in the boiling water until very tender, 20 to 25 minutes. Scoop the cauliflower out of the water with a slotted spoon and transfer it to a blender or food processor. Add the pasta to the boiling water and cook until still somewhat chalky inside and not yet edible, about 5 minutes.

Drain it, rinse it quickly to stop the cooking, and put it in the prepared baking dish.

3. Remove the bay leaves from the stock. Carefully process the cauliflower with 2 cups of the stock, the 2 tablespoons oil, the cheese, mustard, nutmeg, and a sprinkling of salt and pepper. (You may have to work in batches.) If the sauce seems too thick, add the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ cup stock. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Pour the sauce over the pasta, toss, and spread the mixture evenly in the dish. (You can make the dish to this point, cover, and refrigerate for up to a day; return to room temperature before proceeding.)

4. Sprinkle the top with the Parmesan and bread crumbs if you're using them. Bake until the pasta is bubbling and the crumbs turn brown, 15 to 20 minutes. Serve hot.

Less Creamy Cauliflower Mac. Cut the cored head of cauliflower in half instead of into large pieces. In Step 2, cook only half of the cauliflower until it's very tender, then transfer it to the blender or food processor as described. Chop the remaining half of the cauliflower into large pieces and add them to the boiling water along with the pasta. Proceed with the recipe.