

Baked Four-Cheese and Pasta Casserole

Tired of greasy, heavy pasta casseroles with stringy cheese and mushy noodles? We set out to make a creamy casserole with great flavor, properly cooked pasta, and a crisp bread crumb topping.

BY SALLY SAMPSON

P*asta ai quattro formaggi*, the classic Italian pasta dish with four cheeses and heavy cream, is a great idea in theory. In reality, however, it often turns into an incredible mess: tasteless, stringy, heavy, and greasy. I wanted to discover what made this dish great in the first place, delivering a pasta dinner that was silky smooth and rich but not heavy—a grown-up, sophisticated version of macaroni and cheese with Italian flavors.

Of course, the cheese was the first issue in terms of both flavor and texture. I was committed to Italian cheeses, but this barely diminished my choices—research turned up varying combinations and amounts (1 cup to 6½ cups cheese per 1 pound pasta) of Asiago, Fontina, Taleggio, Pecorino Romano, mascarpone, mozzarella, Gorgonzola, Parmesan, and ricotta. Initial testing reduced the scope quickly: Mascarpone and ricotta added to neither flavor nor texture, and Asiago was bland. Pasta tossed with mozzarella was gooey and greasy, whereas Taleggio was not only difficult to obtain but also made the pasta too rich and gluey. After testing numerous combinations of the remaining cheeses, tasters favored a 2½-cup combination of Italian Fontina (which is creamier and better-tasting than versions of this cheese made elsewhere), Gorgonzola, Pecorino Romano, and Parmesan.

Both heating the cheeses and cream together and adding the cheeses separately to the hot pasta produced nasty messes. Each attempt caused the cheeses to curdle, separate, and/or turn greasy. Some recipes solved this problem by beginning with a *besciamella* (known in French as a béchamel). This basic white sauce starts by cooking butter and flour and then adding milk or cream. The cheeses can then be added to the white sauce, which because of the flour doesn't separate. As I soon found out, the white sauce kept the sauce from breaking, but it also had an unintended side effect: The flavor of the cheeses was diminished. The solution was to radically reduce the amount of flour and butter to 2 teaspoons each instead of the usual three to four tablespoons each. Now the sauce was silky and smooth and allowed the flavor of the cheeses to stand out.

After making this recipe a half dozen more times, I was bothered by the notion of heating the cheeses ahead of time with the béchamel.

I wanted to cook the cheeses as little as possible for the best flavor, so I put the shredded/crumbled/grated cheeses in a large bowl and added the hot pasta and hot béchamel. A quick toss melted the cheeses without cooking them. I had now both simplified the recipe and produced a cleaner tasting, more flavorful dish.

Tubular pasta shapes (I found penne to be ideal) allow the sauce to coat the pasta inside and out and are the best choice. Many recipes suggest cooking the pasta fully and then baking it for 20 to 30 minutes. This is a recipe for mushiness. To keep the pasta from overcooking, I found it necessary to drain the pasta several minutes before it was al dente and then minimize the baking time. Just seven minutes in a 500-degree oven (the pasta heats more quickly in a shallow baking dish) is enough to turn the pasta and sauce into a casserole.

Many recipes add a bread crumb topping that browns and crisps in the oven. I tried this casserole with and without the crumb topping, and tasters unanimously voted for the topping. It contrasts nicely with the creamy pasta and helps balance the richness of the sauce.

CREAMY BAKED FOUR-CHEESE PASTA

SERVES 4 TO 6 AS MAIN COURSE, 6 TO 8 AS SIDE DISH

Bread crumb topping

- 3–4 slices white sandwich bread with crusts, torn into quarters
- ¼ cup (½ ounce) grated Parmesan cheese
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon ground black pepper

Pasta and cheese

- 4 ounces Italian Fontina cheese, shredded (about 1 cup)
- 3 ounces Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled (about ¾ cup)
- ½ cup (1 ounce) grated Pecorino Romano cheese
- ¼ cup (½ ounce) grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 pound penne
- 1 tablespoon plus ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons unsalted butter
- 2 teaspoons all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups heavy cream
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper

1. **FOR THE TOPPING:** Pulse bread in food processor until mixture resembles coarse crumbs, about ten 1-second pulses (you should have about 1½ cups). Transfer to small bowl; stir in Parmesan, salt, and pepper. Set mixture aside.

2. **FOR THE PASTA:** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 500 degrees.

3. Bring 4 quarts water to rolling boil in stockpot. Combine cheeses in large bowl; set aside. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt to boiling water; stir to separate pasta. While pasta is cooking, melt butter in small saucepan over medium-low heat; whisk flour into butter until no lumps remain, about 30 seconds. Gradually whisk in cream, increase heat to medium, and bring to boil, stirring occasionally; reduce heat to medium-low and simmer 1 minute to ensure that flour cooks. Stir in remaining ¼ teaspoon salt and pepper; cover cream mixture to keep hot and set aside. When pasta is very al dente (when bitten into, pasta should be opaque and slightly underdone at very center), drain about 5 seconds, leaving pasta slightly wet. Add pasta to bowl with cheeses; immediately pour cream mixture over, then cover bowl with foil or large plate and let stand 3 minutes. Uncover bowl and stir with rubber spatula, scraping bottom of bowl, until cheeses are melted and mixture is thoroughly combined.

4. Transfer pasta to 13 by 9-inch baking dish, then sprinkle evenly with reserved bread crumbs, pressing down lightly. Bake until topping is golden brown, about 7 minutes. Serve immediately.

BAKED FOUR-CHEESE PASTA WITH TOMATOES AND BASIL

Follow recipe for Creamy Baked Four-Cheese Pasta, adding one 14½-ounce can diced tomatoes, drained, to pasta along with cream mixture and stirring in ¼ cup coarsely chopped basil leaves just before transferring pasta to baking dish.

BAKED FOUR-CHEESE PASTA WITH PROSCIUTTO AND PEAS

Follow recipe for Creamy Baked Four-Cheese Pasta, omitting salt from cream mixture and adding 4 ounces prosciutto, chopped, and 1 cup frozen peas to pasta along with cream mixture.