

19 Cauliflower cheese pasta bake

Serves 4

Ingredients

1 medium cauliflower, cut into generous bite-size florets (about 400g prepared weight of florets)
240g dried wholewheat penne pasta
50g butter
40g plain flour
2 teaspoons powdered mustard
600ml milk (whole or semi-skimmed)
50g grated mature cheddar cheese
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
¼ teaspoon freshly ground nutmeg
salt to taste
75g cooked bacon or smoked ham cut into small pieces (optional)
3 tablespoons dried breadcrumbs
2 tablespoons grated cheddar or parmesan

1. Steam the cauliflower florets for 6 minutes (they should be just tender) then tip them into a large rectangular baking dish of approximate dimensions 22cm wide by 33cm long by 6cm deep.
2. Cook the dried wholewheat penne pasta in a big pan of boiling water to which you have added 1/2 teaspoon salt for 9 minutes, drain and set aside. The pasta should have just reached the al dente stage but should not be fully soft as, like the cauliflower, the pasta will cook further when baked in the oven. You can use other pasta shapes if you prefer. Simply cook according to the pack instructions but reduce the stated cooking time by 1-2 minutes to ensure the pasta is not soggy after baking.
3. Tip the drained cooked pasta into the baking dish alongside the cauliflower.
4. Add to the baking dish the pieces of cooked bacon or ham (if using). Stir to distribute the cauliflower, pasta and bacon or ham evenly in the baking dish.
5. Preheat the oven to 200 degrees C fan.
6. Now make the cheese sauce. If you haven't made a cheese or a white sauce before, you'll need to find someone to show you how to do this as it's hard to explain in just words without seeing how the sauce should look and feel at the various stages during its preparation. Melt the butter in a medium saucepan over a low to medium heat. Add the flour and mustard powder to the pan, stir with a wooden spoon to make a paste (the French cooking term for this paste is a roux, a word you may have come across on Masterchef or one of the other cooking shows on TV).
7. Cook the paste over a low heat for a minute or two stirring with a wooden spoon all the time.

8. Now remove the pan from the heat and set it onto a heatproof work surface as it's time to add the milk to the sauce. It's easier to add the milk if you pour it from a jug. Add about 100ml of the milk to the pan and stir hard and fast with the wooden spoon to incorporate the milk with the flour and water paste. This is hard work and the mix may look a bit lumpy but keep beating with the wooden spoon and it will come together and become smooth and creamy. Add the next 100ml of milk and again beat to incorporate. I like to switch to a balloon whisk at this stage as this does an efficient job of mixing the flour and butter and milk together. Add some more milk to the pan, about 200ml this time and whisk again. Add the final 200ml milk and whisk again.
9. Put the pan back on a medium heat and gently bring the sauce to the boil stirring constantly with the wooden spoon or whisk. When the sauce reaches boiling point the flour will swell and thicken the sauce. This happens very quickly and you need to really stir hard at this point to make sure the sauce doesn't become lumpy or stick and burn in the edges of the pan base.
10. Remove the pan from the heat, add the grated cheese, black pepper and nutmeg (but no salt yet) and stir with the wooden spoon to mix. Put the pan back on a low heat and stir constantly for a minute or so to melt and incorporate the cheese into the sauce. Remove the pan from the heat and taste the sauce. Add a little salt if you think the sauce needs it. Remember that cheese is quite a salty ingredient which is why we don't add salt until after the cheese has been added.
11. Pour the sauce over the pasta and cauliflower in the baking dish, spreading it out to fill the dish evenly. Sprinkle the dried breadcrumbs and then the extra grated cheese over the top and bake the dish in the oven for 15 minutes or until the sauce is bubbling and the top crusty and golden brown.