

It's that old family favourite. Macaroni Cheese

August 2025

Please note: This is a recipe heavy article.

Introduction

The story of Macaroni Cheese in Australia begins somewhere before 1823. In that year, in the first reference to macaroni I found, it and vermicelli are listed as goods for sale from the ship *Woodlark* recently arrived in Sydney.¹ There were subsequently regular mentions of macaroni in lists of goods from ships. What were colonists doing with the macaroni?

'In 1820s Sydney merchants advertised both 'English' and 'Italian' macaroni along with vermicelli. When it reached the table it was more commonly served as part of the cheese or dessert course.'²

Eliza Acton in her 1874 *Modern Cookery In All Its Branches Reduced To A System of Easy Practice For The Use Of Private Families* gives recipes for Sweet Macaroni and Dressed Macaroni.³ It is likely that these were the ways that macaroni was being used in the colony.

This is Acton's recipe for Dressed macaroni.

After (macaroni) has been boiled quite tender, drain it well, dissolve from two to three ounces of good butter in a clean stewpan, with a few spoonful of rich cream, or of white sauce, lay in part of the macaroni, strew part of the cheese upon it, add the remainder of the macaroni and the cheese, and toss the whole gently until the ingredients are well incorporated, and adhere to the Macaroni, leaving no liquid perceptible: serve it immediately. Maccaroni, 6 oz.; butter, 3 oz.; Parmesan cheese, 6 oz. ; cream, 4 tablespoonsful. Obs.—If preferred so, cheese may be strewed thickly over the macaroni after it is dished, and just melted and browned with a salamander.

The earliest published Australian recipe I found for Macaroni Cheese was in Philip Muskett's 1893 *The Art of Living in Australia* with recipes by Harriet Wicken.⁴ It was remarkably similar to Acton's.

Macaroni Cheese

2 oz. Macaroni

½ pint of White Sauce

3 oz. Dry Cheese

Pepper and salt

Put the macaroni into boiling salt and water for half an hour or until soft; strain of the water and cut into pieces about 1 ½ inch long. Make the sauce by direction given elsewhere.* Mix in half the cheese and some pepper and salt. Take a dish in which it can be served, and lay at the bottom some macaroni; then some sauce and a little of the dry cheese. Continue in this way till all the materials are used up, leaving plenty of dry cheese for the top. Put in the oven for five or ten minutes till a nice colour. Serve hot.

¹ *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 14 August 1823 p.2

² Mmmmmacaroni!, *The Cook and the Curator* 21 November 2013

³ Acton, Eliza, *Modern Cookery In All Its Branches Reduced To A System of Easy Practice For The Use Of Private Families* Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans 1847 p.421

⁴ Muskett, Philip E. *The Art of Living in Australia*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London.1893 p.246

*White Sauce

½ pint Milk
1 oz. Butter
½ oz. Flour
Salt and Pepper

Put the butter into a small saucepan, and when it is dissolved put in the flour; mix well and pour on the cold milk and stir till it boils. Let it boil for two minutes and it is ready. It may be served either as a sweet or a savoury sauce, putting either sugar or pepper and salt, as required.⁵

I now want to look at 100 years of Macaroni Cheese recipes in newspapers 1893 – 1993. Then I want to look at recipes in the *Australian Women's Weekly*, arguably the most influential magazine post its first edition in June 1933. I will end looking at Macaroni Cheese recipes today.

Macaroni and Cheese in newspapers

Recipes for Macaroni Cheese in the first 100 years in newspapers were mainly variations of the 1893 recipe. There were differences on the size into which the macaroni should be broken - small pieces, short lengths, ½ inch lengths, 2 inch lengths, 4 inch pieces. Different types of cheese were recommended – Parmesan or other dry cheese, Kraft cheddar, soft cheese, good rich cheese. Some called for cayenne. Many called for made mustard. Some called for both. Five called for a clove of garlic mashed/smashed. One called for herbs unspecified, later recipes call for parsley and basil. Two call for onions, one for a shallot. Some call for eggs which are beaten and added to the sauce. One calls for ketchup, two for Worcestershire sauce. One used rice as the thickener in the sauce as opposed to flour. Some call for breadcrumbs to be scattered on the top of the dish while others called for the breadcrumbs to be layered with the macaroni. Length of time for the macaroni to be boiled varied from 20 minutes to one hour.

Macaroni Cheese⁶

Required: Half a pint of melted/butter, 2 oz. macaroni, Parmesan or other dry cheese.

Put the macaroni into fast-boiling water, and cook till tender. Strain it and put it into a greased pie-dish, sprinkle some grated cheese over it, and pour in the sauce; sprinkle a little more cheese on top, and put in the oven till a nice brown colour.

Macaroni and Cheese⁷

450g (1lb) macaroni
300g (10 ½ lb) grated flavoursome cheese (such as Cheddar) paprika
4 tablespoons flour
A cup fresh breadcrumbs
570ml (1pt) milk
1 to 2 tablespoons melted butter
½ teaspoon dry mustard
salt
cayenne
freshly ground black pepper
4 tablespoons butter

⁵ Muskett ... 1893 p.243

⁶ Macaroni Cheese, *The Wingham Chronicle and Manning River Observer* 25 June 1904 p.7

⁷ Macaroni Cheese, *The Canberra Times* 19 April 1989 p.13

The secret of good macaroni and cheese is to make plenty of sauce – the macaroni seems to drink it up - generously flavoured with a good tasty cheese. Cook the macaroni in 3.4 litres (6 pints) of rapidly boiling salted water for 10 minutes. Meanwhile melt the butter over low heat, blend in the flour, and cook slowly a few minutes. Off heat, add the milk, return to medium heat and whisk until smooth. Season to taste, with salt, pepper, mustard, and a pinch of cayenne, then toss in all but 2 tablespoons of the cheese, removing from the heat as soon as it has melted. Drain the macaroni, mix with the cheese sauce, then turn into a 2.3 litre (4 pint) lightly buttered casserole. Bake in 180 degree C (350 degrees F) Mark 4 oven for 20 minutes, covered, then turn up the oven to 230 degrees C (450 degrees F) Mark 8, scatter breadcrumbs on top, drip melted butter over, and sprinkle with paprika and remaining cheese. Bake uncovered for 5 minutes, or slip under the grill until golden on top.

Few recipes had any commentary. One suggested that it be served with vegetables as the principal food of the meal.⁸

Some recipes broke the mould, appearing in dishes of other styles at the Australian table.

Macaroni Cheese Tart⁹

One and half cups self-raising flour, ¼ teaspoon salt, 3oz. shortening, water to mix.

Filling: One cup cooked macaroni, 1 tablespoon chopped parsley, 1 cup grated cheese, salt, cayenne to taste, 1 cup milk, 1 beaten egg, a little butter. Sift flour and salt, rub in shortening. Mix to a workable dough with cold water.

Turn on to a floured board, knead lightly and roll out thinly. Line a greased pie-dish, sprinkle with chopped parsley. Combine macaroni, cheese, salt, and cayenne. Scald, milk, pour on to beaten egg. add to macaroni mixture and blend well. Fill into prepared dish on top of parsley, dot with small pieces of butter and bake in a hot oven 15 minutes, reduce heat and bake until set, about 30 minutes

Macaroni, Cheese and Tomato Casserole¹⁰

2 cups uncooked macaroni

2 oz butter

¼ oz flour (plain)

2 cups milk

1 teaspoon prepared mustard

½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

1 ½ teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon cayenne pepper

2 ½ cups coarsely shredded Cheddar Cheese

2 medium sized tomatoes thinly sliced and peeled

1 cup fine seasoned breadcrumbs

1 tablespoon chopped parsley

3 tablespoons melted butter

Cook macaroni, following direction on package. Drain

thoroughly. Melt the 2 oz butter in saucepan, blend in the flour. Gradually add the milk, cook stirring over a moderate heat until thickened. Add mustard, Worcestershire sauce, salt,

⁸ Macaroni Cheese, *Country Life Stock and Station Journal* 4 July 1924 p.5

⁹ Macaroni Cheese Tart, *The Daily Telegraph* 28 January 1951 p.41

¹⁰ Macaroni, Cheese and Tomato Casserole, *Cooking With Electricity*, *Port Lincoln Times* 19 January 1967 p.14

cayenne, stir until blended. Stir in macaroni. Pour half the macaroni mixture into a casserole. Sprinkle with half of the cheese. Arrange half of the tomato slices in a layer over the cheese. Repeat layers once again. Mix three tablespoons of the melted butter, breadcrumbs and parsley, sprinkle over tomato slices. In a manually controlled range bake on a rack, arched, on the bottom oven rung at 450 deg., top switch "off" bottom "low" 30 minutes then turn "off". In a thermostatically controlled range bake towards the centre of the oven at 425. deg., for 45 minutes.

Macaroni Cheese in the Australian Women's Weekly.

In 1934, a year after its first edition, the *Australian Women's Weekly* published a recipe for Macaroni Cheese Salad. It was the first time the *Weekly* would publish a macaroni cheese recipe well out of the ordinary.

Macaroni Cheese Salad.¹¹

One cup cooked macaroni, 1 cup cold cooked peas, 1 cup grated cheese, 3 sweet pickles chopped, 1 cup salad dressing.

Mix the above ingredients well together. Arrange in a pile on watercress arranged on a plate and well chilled.

The *Weekly* also published versions of the 1893 recipe.

Macaroni Cheese¹²

Mix 1oz. butter with 1oz. flour, 4oz. grated cheese, 1 tablespoon salt. Break up 4oz. macaroni small pieces. Drop into boiling water and boil till soft. Pour off water, and pour on ½ pint of milk, and again boil. Stir in slowly the mixture of flour, butter, salt, and cheese. When well-mixed, pour into buttered piedish and bake in quick oven.

But it's the range of recipes that vary from the 1893 recipe that are of interest to me in this article

In 1945 it published a recipe for a Macaroni Vegetable Ring to *S.T.R.E.T.C.H. your meat ration.*¹³

Macaroni Cheese Goes to a Party

It's that old family favourite – macaroni cheese - popping up again in all its golden, crusty goodness. But ah, what a difference, when you dress it up as a ring mould with a green, green mound of peas nestling in its yellow heart! Naturally, it'll be a main-course dish-and a mighty sustaining one at that.

Macaroni Vegetable Ring

½ lb. Kraft Cheddar Cheese; ½ cup milk; ½ lb. macaroni; ½ lb. peas; salt; cayenne pepper.

Cook the macaroni in boiling salted water for 20 minutes, drain. Make the cheese sauce by mixing the milk and the grated Kraft together and stirring until thick and creamy. Mix with the macaroni, add a little salt and a dash of cayenne pepper, and pour into a round fireproof dish – sprinkle with breadcrumbs. Bake in a moderate oven for 15 minutes. Make a depression in the centre of the macaroni and fill with the not cooked peas. Garnish with tomato slices. Serves six.

¹¹ Macaroni Cheese Salad, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 24 November 1934 p.47

¹² Macaroni Cheese, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 24 April 1937

¹³ Macaroni Vegetable Ring, How to S.T.R.E.T.C.H. your meat ration, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 5 May 1945 p.37

Bacon-Macaroni Cheese¹⁴

Four ounces bacon rashers, 1 cup tomato juice or 1 or 2 tablespoons tomato sauce, cup milk, 1 medium onion, 1 clove garlic, ½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce, 1 cup grated cheese, 2 cups cooked macaroni

Remove rind from bacon, cut rashers into 2in. pieces and line bottom and sides of greased oven-proof dish. Mix tomato juice or sauce, milk, finely chopped onion and garlic, and Worcestershire sauce. Pour into dish in alternate layers with cooked macaroni. Top with grated cheese. Bake in moderate oven 25 minutes. Garnish with parsley. This dish may be prepared in individual scallop shells or ramekins. Line dishes with bacon, mix macaroni with savory sauce, and fill into dishes. Top with cheese, bake 15 to 20 minutes.

There was a recipe for Cauliflower Macaroni and Cheese (1953); a Breakfast Savory (1953); a Corned Beef Dinner.

In 1959 there was a recipe for one of the more interesting dishes - Oyster Macaroni Loaf.¹⁵

One cup macaroni, 1 ½ cups milk, ¼ lb. shredded cheddar cheese, 1 cup soft breadcrumbs, 2oz. butter or substitute, 1 tablespoon each finely chopped chives, parsley, and green pepper, juice of ½ a lemon, 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce, ¼ teaspoon each salt and dry mustard, pinch each pepper and nutmeg, 3 eggs, 1 dozen oysters.

Cook macaroni in boiling salted water until soft, drain. Heat milk and cheese in saucepan until cheese melts. Add breadcrumbs, butter, chives, parsley, green pepper, lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce, salt, mustard, pepper, and nutmeg. Stir in beaten eggs and drained macaroni. Fill half the mixture into a greased 9in.x 5in. loaf-tin and cover with oysters. Top with the remaining macaroni mixture. Bake in a moderate oven 1 hour or until loaf is set and golden brown. Unmould on to serving platter, garnish with lemon wedges and sprigs of parsley.

In 1962 it published the quintessential Australian dish - Macaroni and Cheese Tropical.¹⁶

One tablespoon butter, 1 level tablespoon flour, 1 pint milk, salt, pepper, and cayenne, a can of sliced pineapple, 6oz. (1 ½ cups) grated matured cheese, ½ cup chopped onion, 1 ¼ cup chopped red capsicum, 1 cup diced celery, extra butter, ¼ cup cooked green peas, ¼ lb bacon (crisply fried), ¼ lb. macaroni cooked until tender in salted water, then a knob of butter added. Melt the butter in a saucepan. Stir in the flour. Cook several minutes, then gradually add the milk. Stir constantly until thickened. Season to taste salt, pepper, cayenne. Add one cup of the grated cheese and 1 slice of pineapple (crushed). Fry the onion, capsicum and celery lightly in extra butter. Mix them into sauce, together with peas and bacon. Fold through the macaroni. Pour into ovenproof dish, top with remaining cheese, and bake golden brown. Top with remaining pineapple and return to warm oven until serving time.

¹⁴ Bacon-Macaroni Cheese, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 18 November 1953 p.58

¹⁵ Oyster Macaroni Loaf, *The Australian Women's Weekly* 25 November 1959 p.74

¹⁶ Macaroni and Cheese Tropical, *The Australian Women's Weekly*

Macaroni Cheese today

Many home cooks go to the internet these days for recipes. I wondered what they would find. I searched it for macaroni cheese recipes and found both basic recipes and several that step away from the basic.

Basic Mac and Cheese

Ingredients (8)

375g macaroni
60 g butter
1/3 cup(50g) plain flour
2 tsp Dijon mustard
2 ½ cups (625g) milk
1 cup coarsely grated cheddar
½ cup panko breadcrumbs
½ cup (40g) finely grated parmesan

Method

Step1. Preheat oven to 180 C. Cook the macaroni in a large saucepan of boiling water following the packet instructions or until al dente. Drain well.

Step 2. Meanwhile melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add flour and mustard. Cook , stirring, for 2 minutes or until the mixture bubbles and is grainy . Reduce the heat to low. Gradually add the milk , stirring constantly. Cook for 5 minutes or until the sauce boils and thickens. Move from the heat. Add cheddar. Stir to combine.¹⁷

A version of macaroni cheese also is in the 2021 book *The Classic Australian Cook Book* produced by Australian Geographic, though its ingredient are anything but classic.¹⁸

Macaroni Cheese

Ingredients

300g (9 ½ ounces) macaroni
1 teaspoon salt
¾ cup (180ml) milk
1 ¼ pouring cream
200g (6 ½ ml) mozzarella grated
100g (3 ounces) fetta crumbled, or vintage cheddar, grated
2 cups baby spinach
2 tablespoons fresh dill, coarsely chopped
1 teaspoon lemon rind zested

Method

1.Place macaroni, 2 ½ cups boiling water, and salt into the bowl of a rice cooker, stir to combine. Set rice cooker to ‘regular cook’. Cook, covered for 8 minutes or until water is almost absorbed and pasta is slightly firm.

2.Stir in milk, cream, mozzarella, and fetta. Cook for a further 5 minutes, season. The sauce will look wet but will thicken on standing). Stir in the baby spinach until wilted. Divide into bowls.

3.Combine dill and lemon zest into a small bowl, sprinkle over mac and cheese.

¹⁷ Basic Mac and Cheese, taste.com.au

¹⁸ Macaroni Cheese, *Australian Geographic* 2021

End

Macaroni cheese became a regular at the Australian table relatively early probably prior to the 1820's. Most recipes in newspapers over 100 years were variations on the earliest published recipe in 1893. But there were recipes that pushed the boundaries, incorporating ingredients or styles not in the basic recipe. Here in 2025, the basic recipe continues to be shared.

P.S. October 2025 and macaroni cheese has made it into the *Classic Australian Cookbook*.

Appendix

Facebook Cohort's comments

First written recipe was in an English medieval cookbook. Thomas Jefferson brought it to the USA, which made it popular, eventually worldwide. Try The Joy of Cooking (written by Irma Rombauer and descendants), any edition, for various versions. Strong cheese is the crucial ingredient, not ordinary mature cheddar. I also like to add some Gruyère for that sweet nutty taste.

Macaroni Cheese is one of my most favourite comfort foods. Using a strong Cheddar cheese, a few teaspoonfuls of English mustard and a generous grind of white pepper are essential ingredients. The bechamel sauce should be as smooth and not too thick. And ... I think I might just make some for dinner.

Love it, good cheese matters, is good with bacon and baked with a panko cheese topping and served with tomato sauce.

Macaroni cheese is one of my most favourite things – I discovered it late, as my dad was allergic to cheese and my mum hated pasta, so we never had it as kids. Eating a home-made version as an adult it was a revelation. Now I make it with Dijon mustard and feta cheese grated and stirred into the bechamel, then topped with Parmesan and cheddar and breadcrumbs crust with a dollop of butter...oh yum I want that for dinner tonight.