

Cracker Barrel Mac and Cheese Recipe Copycat

Prep Time: 10 minutes Cook Time: 30 minutes Total Time: 40 minutes Serves: 4

Ingredients

- 8 ounces uncooked elbow macaroni
- 2 tablespoons salted butter
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 cups whole milk
- 2½ cups sharp cheddar cheese, freshly shredded, divided
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper

Kitchen Equipment You'll Need

- Large pot — for boiling the macaroni
- Colander/strainer — for draining the pasta
- Medium saucepan — for making the cheese sauce
- Whisk — for keeping the sauce smooth and lump-free
- Wooden spoon or silicone spatula — for stirring and combining the pasta
- Measuring cups and measuring spoons
- Kitchen scale — helpful for accurately measuring macaroni and cheese
- Cheese grater — if shredding cheese from a block
- Baking dish or casserole dish
- Oven and oven mitts

Prep Work

Shred the cheese, measure the milk, and set everything where you can grab it. Preheat the oven to 350°F so it is ready when the mac and cheese reaches the baking dish.

Cook the Macaroni

1. Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil. Add a generous pinch of salt, then stir in the uncooked elbow macaroni.
2. Cook the macaroni until just tender but still has a little bite. Aim toward the lower end of the package cooking range because the pasta will continue cooking in the sauce and oven.

3. Drain well in a colander. Do not rinse. Set aside.

Make the Cheese Sauce

1. Melt the butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Sprinkle in the flour and whisk immediately. Cook for about 1 minute, until smooth. Do not brown the flour.
2. Slowly pour in the milk while whisking constantly. Continue cooking and whisking until slightly thickened and smooth. It should coat the back of a spoon without becoming overly thick.
3. Take the saucepan off the heat or reduce the heat to low before adding the cheese. Avoid hard bubbling.

Add the Cheese

1. Turn the heat to low. Add the shredded cheddar for the sauce a little at a time, whisking gently after each addition. Save the remaining shredded cheese for the topping.
2. Stir until the cheese is completely melted and the sauce is smooth, glossy, and creamy. Do not boil. If needed, add a small splash of milk to loosen the sauce.

Combine the Macaroni and Cheese Sauce

1. Add the drained macaroni to the cheese sauce. Gently fold with a wooden spoon or silicone spatula until every noodle is coated.
2. Remove from the heat once evenly coated.
3. Taste and adjust the salt or black pepper if needed.

Transfer to the Baking Dish

1. Lightly grease a baking dish and spoon the macaroni and cheese into it. Spread evenly.
2. Sprinkle the reserved shredded cheddar evenly over the top.

Bake Until Hot and Bubbly

1. Place in the preheated 350°F oven and bake until hot throughout and the cheese on top has melted. Avoid overbaking so the sauce stays creamy.
2. For a more golden top, broil for the last few minutes and watch closely. Remove when lightly browned and bubbly.

Let It Rest and Serve

1. Remove from the oven and rest for 2–3 minutes so the sauce can settle.
2. Scoop and serve warm, with tender elbows, creamy cheese sauce, and a lightly golden cheesy top.

Serving Tips

Serve right after it comes out of the oven. Pair it with Cracker Barrel-style meatloaf and green beans for a comforting dinner, or enjoy a bowl on its own.

Tips for That Creamy, Homestyle Finish

Have the Cheese Shredded and Ready

Shred the cheddar before cooking so it is ready when the sauce comes together.

Give the Elbows a Little Bite

Cook the macaroni until tender with a little firmness left because it continues cooking in the sauce and oven.

Don't Cook the Sauce Down Too Far

Keep the milk mixture slightly loose. The cheddar and oven will thicken the finished dish.

Let the Cheese Melt at Its Own Pace

Add cheddar gradually and let each addition melt before adding more.

Keep Things Gentle

Avoid overbaking. You want a hot, bubbly center and lightly golden top without drying the sauce.

Taste It Like You Mean It

Taste before baking and adjust salt or pepper if needed.

How to Store and Reheat Leftover Mac and Cheese

Store leftovers covered in an airtight container in the refrigerator. Reheat gently and add a little milk as needed to help bring back the creamy texture. Stir as it warms.

Frequently Asked Questions

- How do I make Cracker Barrel mac and cheese better?
- What is the secret to creamy Cracker Barrel-style mac and cheese?
- Does Cracker Barrel mac and cheese use real cheese?
- Can I make Cracker Barrel mac and cheese without baking it?
- Why did my mac and cheese turn out dry?
- Can I make this ahead of time?

Did You Make This Cracker Barrel Mac and Cheese?

Leave a star rating and share your experience. Did you use freshly shredded sharp cheddar or put your own twist on this creamy, cheesy classic?

If you snapped a photo, tag @crackerbarrelrecipes on Instagram so we can see your homemade mac and cheese!