

How To Make Haitian Macaroni Au Gratin!

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Introduction



Figure 1. Haitian macaroni au gratin, preserved from the original recipe.

Haitian macaroni au gratin—often written *makawoni au gratin*, *makawoni o graten*, or *gratin de macaroni*—is a baked pasta dish associated with family gatherings, holidays, weddings, birthdays, Sunday meals, and other celebrations. It is sometimes introduced as “Haitian macaroni and cheese,” but that description only partly captures it. The dish may include evaporated milk, onions, garlic, bell pepper, epis or other seasoning, firm cheese, and optional ham, sausage, mayonnaise, mustard, or hot sauce. Recipes differ among households and regions, so there is no single formula that defines authenticity. The method below preserves the original assignment’s photographed stages while making the quantities, sequence, food-safety guidance, and cultural background more precise. (Mirlene)

Cultural Background

Haitian cooking reflects Indigenous Caribbean ingredients, West and Central African knowledge, French colonial techniques, and later exchanges across the Caribbean and diaspora. France controlled Saint-Domingue before Haitian independence in 1804, so French culinary vocabulary such as *au gratin* became part of the historical context. It would be inaccurate, however, to describe the dish as simply a French import. Haitian cooks transformed baked pasta through local seasoning preferences, available cheeses, evaporated milk, peppers, meat, and communal traditions. A family recipe can therefore be recognizably Haitian while differing substantially from another family’s version.

Yield and Equipment

This version makes approximately 10 to 12 side-dish servings or 6 to 8 larger servings. Use a large pot, colander, sturdy spoon or whisk, saucepan if preparing the roux separately, and a greased baking dish around 13 by 9 inches. The original 15 by 10 by 2-inch dish also works but produces a slightly thinner layer. A food thermometer is useful when the recipe includes ham or other meat and when leftovers are reheated. Grate the cheese before beginning and prepare the vegetables so the sauce can be assembled without interruption.

Ingredients

Pasta: 1 pound ridged macaroni, penne, rigatoni, or another short pasta with holes or grooves; water for boiling; and salt according to taste and dietary needs.

Aromatics: 2 tablespoons butter or neutral oil, 1 medium onion finely chopped, 2 garlic cloves minced, and approximately 1 cup diced bell pepper. Scallion, thyme, parsley, or a modest amount of Haitian epis may be added.

Sauce: 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour, 1 can evaporated milk, and 1 to 2 cups additional milk as needed. Use pasteurized dairy products. (USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service)

Cheese: about 3 to 4 cups grated cheese in total. A combination of Gouda, Edam, cheddar, Parmesan, or a firm local cheese can be used. Moor's Head cheese is traditional in some Haitian households but may not be available everywhere.

Optional additions: 1 to 2 cups diced fully cooked ham, cooked sausage, or shredded cooked chicken; hot sauce; mustard; mayonnaise; black pepper; seasoned salt; and extra cheese for the top. Meat-free versions are common and do not require a substitute.

Choosing the Pasta and Cheese

Ridged pasta holds the sauce and gives the casserole structure. The pasta should be tender but not disintegrating because it continues to absorb liquid in the oven. The original essay states that Haitians universally prefer very soft pasta, but household preferences differ. A useful approach is to cook it slightly beyond firm *al dente* while keeping the shape intact. Cheese choice also changes the result. Gouda or Edam produces a smooth, savory base; cheddar adds sharpness; Parmesan contributes salt and browning. Pre-shredded cheese may contain anti-caking starch that reduces smooth melting, so freshly grated cheese is preferable when practical.

Step 1: Cook the Pasta



Bring a large pot of water to a full boil. Add salt, then add the pasta and stir during the first minute so pieces do not stick. Cook according to the package as a starting point, tasting near the end. Drain when the pasta is tender but still holds its form. Do not rinse unless the recipe's family tradition specifically calls for it; surface starch helps the sauce cling. Set the pasta aside briefly while preparing the aromatics and sauce. Avoid leaving cooked pasta at room temperature for an extended period.

Step 2: Preheat and Prepare the Dish

Heat the oven to 350°F, or approximately 177°C. Grease the baking dish lightly with butter or oil. Position a rack near the center so the pasta heats evenly without scorching the top. If using a very deep dish, baking may take longer; if using a wide shallow dish, begin checking earlier. The casserole is ready when it is bubbling at the edges, hot through the center, and golden on top rather than when a fixed number of minutes has passed. (Mirlene)

Step 3: Sauté the Aromatics



Melt 2 tablespoons of butter in the pot over medium heat. Add the onion and bell pepper and cook until softened, generally 4 to 6 minutes. Add garlic near the end so it becomes fragrant without burning. If using epis, add a controlled amount and taste before adding extra salt because seasoning blends may already contain sodium. If using cooked ham or sausage, stir it in long enough to heat and distribute it. Raw meat should not be placed directly into the casserole without being cooked safely first.

Step 4: Make the Roux



In a saucepan, melt 3 tablespoons of butter over medium-low heat. Whisk in 3 tablespoons of flour and cook for about 1 to 2 minutes. The purpose is to remove the raw-flour taste without deeply browning the roux. Gradually add evaporated milk while whisking. Add ordinary milk in portions until the sauce is smooth and thick enough to coat a spoon. A cold liquid added all at once can create lumps; gradual addition and continuous whisking reduce that risk. If lumps remain, lower the heat and whisk firmly rather than increasing the temperature.

Step 5: Melt the Cheese

Reduce the heat before adding cheese. Stir in approximately two-thirds of the grated cheese by handfuls, allowing each addition to melt. High heat can cause the fat and protein to separate, creating a grainy sauce. Season with black pepper, hot sauce, mustard, or seasoned salt after the cheese has been incorporated because cheese and ham already contribute salt. Mayonnaise is optional rather than essential; a small amount can add richness, but too much may make the sauce oily or mask the seasoning.

Step 6: Combine Pasta and Sauce



Add the drained pasta to the aromatic mixture, then pour in the cheese sauce. Fold carefully until every piece is coated and the vegetables and optional meat are evenly distributed. The mixture should look slightly looser than the final casserole because the pasta will absorb liquid during baking. If it appears dry before it enters the oven, add a small amount of milk. Taste a spoonful only if all meat ingredients are already fully cooked and the mixture can be sampled safely.

Step 7: Fill and Top the Baking Dish

Transfer the mixture into the prepared dish and spread it evenly into the corners without compressing it tightly. Sprinkle the remaining cheese over the surface. A small amount of Parmesan promotes browning, while Gouda or cheddar produces a softer melted layer. Some cooks add breadcrumbs, but they are optional and change the texture. Place the dish on a sheet pan if it is very full so bubbling sauce does not spill onto the oven floor.

Step 8: Bake Until Golden and Hot



Bake for approximately 30 to 45 minutes, checking the center and edges. A chilled assembled casserole may require longer. If the top browns before the center is hot, cover loosely with foil and continue baking. A casserole containing meat should reach 165°F in the center. Remove the dish when it bubbles and the top is golden. Rest it for 10 to 15 minutes so the sauce settles and portions hold together. The original 45-to-60-minute range may be suitable for a large deep dish, but time should follow dish depth and temperature rather than tradition alone. (USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service)

Serving Suggestions

Macaroni au gratin is rich and works well as a side dish with griot, baked or stewed chicken, turkey, fish, legumes, plantains, pikliz, salad, or cooked vegetables. It can also serve as a main dish, especially when it includes meat or is paired with beans. For a celebration buffet, provide a clean serving utensil and avoid leaving the casserole unrefrigerated for more than two hours, or one hour in very hot conditions. Serving smaller portions allows guests to appreciate the dish alongside other Haitian foods.

Variations and Dietary Adaptations

A vegetarian version can omit ham and use extra vegetables or mushrooms. For lactose intolerance, lactose-free evaporated milk and suitable cheeses may work, although melting behavior varies. A gluten-free pasta and gluten-free flour blend can be used, but the sauce may need adjustment. Lower-sodium versions should rely on unsalted butter, reduced-sodium cheese where available, and herbs rather than several salty seasonings. These adaptations are not claims that the traditional version is unhealthy; they simply make the dish accessible to different needs.

Preventing Common Problems

Dry macaroni usually results from too little sauce, overcooked pasta, a very wide dish, or excessive baking. Grainy sauce often comes from high heat or cheese added too quickly. A greasy surface may result from too much butter, high-fat meat, or a cheese that separates. Blandness is best corrected through balanced aromatics, pepper, herbs, hot sauce, and appropriate salt rather than by adding cheese alone. If the casserole will be baked later, cool and refrigerate the components promptly and expect additional baking time from cold.

Storage and Reheating

Refrigerate leftovers within two hours in shallow covered containers. USDA guidance recommends using most cooked leftovers within three to four days. Freeze portions when longer storage is needed, recognizing that the sauce may become less smooth after thawing. Reheat leftovers to 165°F throughout. Covering the portion and adding a spoonful of milk helps restore moisture. A microwave should be paused for stirring or rotation because dense casseroles can contain cold spots. Discard food that has remained at unsafe room temperature rather than relying on smell or appearance.

Conclusion

Haitian macaroni au gratin is a flexible celebration dish shaped by Haitian history, family memory, diaspora, and individual taste. A reliable version depends on tender pasta, well-cooked aromatics, a smooth roux-based sauce, cheese added over moderate heat, and baking only until the center is hot and the top is golden. Ham, mayonnaise, epis, mustard, and specific cheeses are options rather than universal requirements. Preserving the original photographs while clarifying the process shows that cultural respect and technical accuracy can strengthen the same recipe. The best version is one that is safe, well seasoned, and meaningful to the people sharing it. (Mirlene)

Works Cited

Mirlene. (2023). "Haitian Macaroni Au Gratin." *Savory Thoughts*.

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