

Oven-baked

Buffalo Chicken and Crispy Skin Mac 'n' Cheese

While it wouldn't be too smart to put actual chicken wings in mac & cheese, I discovered it's pretty easy to replicate the flavors found in the popular snack in a mac & cheese. The key is, of course, lots of hot sauce and the signature blue cheese. But wings are often crispy, so my answer to that is to top the casserole with crisped chicken skin. It's easy to make and, because of its potato chip-like texture, totally addictive. After that, the dish is open to interpretation. But needless to say, this recipe has lots of cheese! If you have leftovers, this dish makes particularly good fried bites.

Chicken and Crispy Skin

2 pounds skin-on, boneless chicken breasts (about 4 halves; see Note)

2 tablespoons salted butter

4 tablespoons Frank's RedHot Sauce or Frank's RedHot Buffalo Wings Hot Sauce (or use your favorite brand)

1 teaspoon salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Mac & cheese

2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons kosher salt

1 pound small shell pasta (or use small elbow macaroni)

4 tablespoons salted butter

¼ cup all-purpose flour

4 cups whole or reduced-fat milk

2 cups heavy cream

24 ounces Parrano cheese, coarsely grated (about 8 cups)

8 ounces Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled (about 1 ½ cups)

8 ounces cream cheese, cut into ½-inch pieces

¾ cup Frank's RedHot Sauce plus more for a super fiery mac & cheese (or use your favorite brand)

1 teaspoon dry mustard powder

8 medium celery stalks, cut into ¼-inch dice (about 2 ½ cups)

¾ cup finely chopped fresh chives

For the chicken:

Carefully remove the skin in one piece. Set aside. Cut the meat into ½-inch pieces.

Melt the butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and cook, stirring occasionally, until the meat is no longer pink. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to a large bowl. Add the hot sauce and stir to combine. Wipe out the skillet with a paper towel but do not wash it.

For the crispy skin

Add the reserved chicken skin to the same skillet, and cook over medium-high heat until the undersides are golden brown, about 5 minutes. Use a spatula to flatten the

skin if it begins to curl. You want to get the skin as bubble-free and paper-thin as possible. Turn and cook the other side until golden brown and very crisp, 5 to 7 minutes. Watch carefully, because it can burn easily. Season with the salt and pepper to taste. Place on a paper towel-lined plate, where the skin will continue to crisp as it cools. When cool, break into bite-size pieces. Set aside. (**Note:** The crispy skin can be made up to 2 days ahead and stored in an airtight container).

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Butter a 9 x 13 (3-quart) baking dish pan or pan (or twelve 8-ounce ramekins). Set aside.

Make the pasta

Butter a 9 x 13 (3-quart) baking dish or pan (or 12 8-ounce ramekins). Set aside.

Fill a 6- to 8-quart pot about three-quarters full with water and add 2 tablespoons of the salt. Bring to a boil and add the pasta. Cook, stirring once or twice, until tender but firm, about 4 minutes, and drain.

Using the same pot you used to cook the pasta, melt the butter over medium heat. Slowly whisk in the flour and stir constantly until a paste forms, 30 to 45 seconds. Continue stirring for about 2 minutes more, or until the mixture starts to darken slightly and smell a bit nutty. Slowly whisk in the milk, cream and the remaining 2 teaspoons salt and cook until the mixture starts to thicken and just beginning to bubble around the edges, 5 to 7 minutes. It should be thick enough to coat the back of a wooden spoon. Add 6 cups of the Gouda, the blue cheese, cream cheese, hot sauce and mustard powder. Stir until the

cheese has melted and the sauce is smooth but not too runny. It should be similar in texture to cake batter. If it's soupy, continue cooking until it thickens.

Add the pasta, chicken, celery, and chives and stir to combine. Pour into the prepared baking dish. Sprinkle the remaining Gouda on top, and top with the crispy skin pieces. Place the dish on a rimmed baking sheet and bake until bubbling and golden brown, about 30 minutes. Let cool for 15 to 20 minutes before serving. Serve extra hot sauce alongside.

Serves 12 to 16

Note: Some chicken breasts seem to have more skin than others. If yours don't have much skin, buy 1 or 2 more breasts or even a whole chicken depending how much you love crispy skin. Remove the skin, (an admittedly tricky task when it's a whole chicken) and cook as directed above. Save the meat for another use.

Add-ins

Pancetta: Cut one 6-ounce piece into bite-size pieces. Cook in a medium skillet over medium-high heat until browned around the edges. Drain on paper towels and add with the chicken.