

Shells and Cheese with Bacon

Serves 8

salt and fresh ground pepper to taste
1 pound small dried pasta shells
1/2 pound thick cut bacon, cut into lardons
1/2 medium onion, medium diced
1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
4 cups whole milk
2 teaspoons fresh dijon mustard
1/8 teaspoon cayenne, or to taste
pinch nutmeg
4 cups grated extra-sharp white cheddar cheese
3 cups grated gruyere cheese
1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley
1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon
2 1/2 cups fresh bread crumbs
4 tablespoons melted butter

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Cook shells until al dente and drain.

Preheat oven to 375°F. and butter a 3- to 4-quart gratin dish or other shallow baking dish.

Heat a heavy large saucepot over medium heat. Add bacon and saute until golden brown. Add onions to pan and cook until onions are tender, about 5 minutes. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly for about 2 minutes.

Whisk in milk gradually and bring to a boil. Simmer sauce, whisking occasionally, until thickened, about 2 minutes. Add mustard, cayenne, and nutmeg and whisk in 3 cups cheddar and 2 cups gruyere. When cheese is melted season with salt and pepper.

In a large bowl stir together shells, herbs and sauce and adjust seasoning, if

necessary. Transfer to prepared dish. In a medium bowl stir together bread crumbs, melted butter and remaining 1 cup cheddar and 1 cup gruyere; season with salt and pepper. Sprinkle cheese breadcrumb mixture evenly over pasta. Bake until golden brown and bubbly, about 30 minutes. Turn oven on broil during last 3 minutes of cooking, if desired, to achieve a deep golden brown color on breadcrumbs. Allow to sit for 5 minutes and serve.