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Image by Maitane Romagosa and Manali Doshi for Thrillist

# PANTRY GOALS

Everyone, regardless of age or status, loves macaroni and cheese. It is even said that Kurt Cobain consistently requested it when he was on tour, refusing to eat gourmet macaroni in favor of the boxed version. And it's hard to blame him—the meal has been not only a kitchen mainstay but a source of warmth and comfort for decades.

It all started during World War II, when access to fresh foods was limited, boxed mac and cheese became a household staple. It was available at a low cost, quick and easy to make, and tasted great, resulting in it becoming a main dish for families across America.

Amidst the pandemic, many of us found ourselves in a similar place, unable to frequent grocery stores and instead opting to stock up on simple pantry items that could last for weeks. As a result, Kraft Macaroni & Cheese sales went up to an overwhelming degree. Some of us were craving ease amidst a tumultuous time, while others were just longing for consolation and nostalgia from one of our childhood favorites.

“When you’re a kid, mac and cheese is the first thing that you learn how to cook,” says Jen Zeszut, CEO and co-founder of [Goodles](#), a macaroni and cheese company founded by actress Gal Gadot that brings nutrition to the classic dish. “It got my little sister and I through a lot of times when we were without our parents growing up, so it’s a really special food for me.”

And while sometimes there is nothing better than a warm bowl of cheesy noodles, the meal is hardly nutritious. Ultimately, the beloved dish often leaves us a bit lethargic and in need of a nap.

But our childhood favorite has come a long way since the early 1900s, and between adults indulging in it more frequently to parents wanting their children to eat nourishing foods, healthy macaroni and cheese is on the rise.

“It’s not just for kids anymore,” Zeszut says. “We knew adults of all ages were eating mac and cheese, so we wanted to give them something to feel good about, both nutritionally and from a comfort standpoint.”

Boxed macaroni and cheese is taking on an exciting new identity, but between all of the colorful packaging and ingredients lists, it can be a bit difficult to navigate the burgeoning healthy mac and cheese scene. Keep reading for all of the different boxes you can try.

**Thrillist TV**

## The History of Tailgating

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### Annie's

We all know Annie's—there's even a bevy of articles discussing whether it reigns supreme over Kraft. Regardless of the age-old argument, there is something deeply heartening about it, maybe because of its natural cheese flavor or the fact that there's a bunny on their packaging. It's pretty much as widely available as Kraft, and thank goodness for that, because sometimes all we need is that classic real-aged cheddar.

### Daiya

A tried-and-true classic amongst people with a variety of allergies, Daiya is perhaps the original healthier mac and cheese, and its creamy sauce and familiar flavors will always do the trick. It is one of the more popular brands, with dairy-free and gluten-free pizzas, desserts, and salad dressings under their belt. Like Annie's, it is available in most grocery stores.

### Goodles

The first boxed mac and cheese to receive a Clean Label certification, Goodles is all about what its name boasts—making you feel good. With vibrant packaging and nutrients from kale, spinach, shiitake mushroom, and more, Goodles is undoubtedly a healthy and satisfying substitute. While the company is about emanating that childhood nostalgia, Goodles has complex flavors that appeal to all ages—like cacio e pepe and asiago and Parmesan. Goodles is available online, as well as in Target.



Camp

## **Camp**

If you're looking for the closest replacement to Kraft, Camp is your answer. The ridiculously fluffy, somehow gluten-free noodles and rich sauce harken you back to when life was so much simpler. As if that isn't enough, Camp's gorgeous pink and yellow boxes plastered with adorable, child-like fonts will look great in your kitchen. The brand provides vegan and vegetarian options, and is currently only available on its website.

## **Banza**

Banza is dedicated to making healthy food more accessible while also lowering greenhouse emissions by replacing common wheat, corn, and rice dishes with the efficient and sustainable chickpea. With its massive amount of protein, Banza's mac and cheese will keep you full and energized for hours. It is perfect for people who are looking to lower their carb intake but still want to receive the satisfaction of eating that salty, marigold-hued pasta we know and love. The mac and cheese is available in myriad stores, such as Target, Whole Foods, Stop & Shop, and more.

# Freak Flag

Freak Flag believes cooking is a creative expression of who we are, even if it is as simple as dumping powdered cheese into noodles. The brand sets its mac and cheese apart with innovative variations—think broccoli and cheese, kale cheddar, and more. And to back up this passion for self-expression, Freak Flag dedicates 1% of its annual net revenue to supporting youth music, art, and culinary education. Boxes are currently available in stores like Whole Foods, Sprouts, Gelson's, and more.

## Howl

This is the mac and cheese vegans have been waiting for. Howl is bound to become a pantry necessity, mainly due to its unique and decadent plant-based cashew sauce that has a texture dangerously close to the real thing. Howl goes above and beyond with its flavors, with a selection that includes roasted garlic with Italian herbs and spicy chipotle when you want a bit of a kick. You can find Howl at Whole Foods, Thrive Market, and on its website.

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*Kelsey Allen is an editorial assistant at Thrillist. Her love for food was influenced by her mother and her Tata.*

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### What's your favorite fast food restaurant?

Burger King

Chipotle

Dairy Queen

In-N-Out

KFC

McDonald's

Taco Bell

Wendy's

Other

None of the above

Pick at least 1 choice

