

BEST HOMEMADE MACARONI & CHEESE

By Lisa Donovan

Rocky Top Beer BBQ and Grill

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Jackson, MI
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rockytop4bbq.com

Grand River Brewery

117 W. Louis Glick Hwy.
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The Dirty Bird

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2022 Best of Jackson Overall Winner **ROCKY TOP BEER BBQ AND GRILL**



Hungry customers heading into Rocky Top Beer BBQ and Grill can look forward to a triple treat. The menu offers not one, not two, but three versions of the restaurant's hot and bubbly mac and cheese. Each variation is the brainchild of owner and head chef Nick Green.

All three versions get their own special twist. The most popular is the smoked mac and cheese, made with elbow macaroni and placed in the smoker to add a nice smoky flavor. Next up is the jalapeno mac and cheese, made with cavatappi pasta and a zippy jalapeno cream sauce. And third is the three-cheese style, baked with white cheddar cheese and pipette pasta and topped with homemade garlic ranch seasoning, grated parmesan cheese, and toasted panko breadcrumbs for a perfect crunch.

"Most people really like the smoked mac and cheese. That's the one I use for catering," said Green. "I'd love people to try the three-cheese baked mac and cheese. That's my favorite."

Green first jumped into the culinary field as a teenager, cooking at Hankerd Hills Golf Course in Pleasant Lake for three years. As he worked toward an engineering degree at Western Michigan University, he continued developing his cooking skills at Bennigan's and helped open a bar.

After a brief stint in automotive engineering, Green returned to his love of cooking at the newly opened Rocky Top. He soon began making changes to the menu to entice customers and keep them coming back for more. It didn't take long for the owner to see Green's passion and creativity in the kitchen. Nine years ago, the owner asked if he was interested in buying the restaurant, and he's been at the helm ever since.

Green likes to keep changing the menu to stay current. Harkening back to his engineering days, he engages in some research and development by checking out menu design, creation, and production engineering at other restaurants.

"I hope people feel that our food tastes homemade from scratch and pairs well with our BBQ, burgers, and other food and beverage options," he said.

In 2019, Rocky Top landed a spot as a finalist in Best of Jackson's wings category, but Green is thrilled to be nominated again in a different category. "It feels great to be nominated as a finalist," he said. "It's an honor to be recognized for the hard work, dedication, and quality food produced by everyone here, from management to waitstaff, bartenders, and kitchen staff."



INSET: Owner Nick Green.



2022 Best Homemade Macaroni & Cheese Finalist

GRAND RIVER BREWERY



Grand River Brewery chef Melinda Comfort displays the macaroni and cheese.

The secret sauce is the key to tantalizing the taste buds of mac and cheese fans at Grand River Brewery. The recipe for the popular dish, with its delectable bechamel sauce, is probably the creation of several chefs, including owner Justin Dalenberg. He joined the restaurant as a consultant about five years ago and revamped the whole menu before taking over as owner. But Head Chef Megan Vilminot and her team are on the front lines of making sure the mac and cheese — and everything else on the menu — is served consistently delicious every time.

Cabot Vermont white cheddar, onions, bacon, and rigatonicini pasta — slightly bigger than rigatoni — form the basis for

the recipe. Vilminot says the best part is that they caramelize their own bechamel sauce, scraping all of the dark, crispy flavor off the piping-hot cast-iron skillet and incorporating it into the mac and cheese.

“I tell my cooks if I can’t hear that bechamel hitting the pan from across the kitchen, you’re not doing it right,” said Vilminot, who began cooking at restaurants like Outback when





she was 17. Her desire to expand her skills and get more involved with the farm-to-table movement brought her to Grand River Brewery about three years ago.

After all the mac and cheese ingredients are combined and topped with toasted breadcrumbs, they emerge from the kitchen in a variety of formats. People with lighter appetites might prefer the eight-ounce side dish. A little hungrier? Try the Boat Mac, a larger portion served in a ceramic gravy boat. Really hungry? Go for the Heart Attack Mac, an even bigger portion topped with breadcrumbs, pico de gallo, and your choice of meat — pork, brisket, or even salmon. The mac and cheese is also served as a side dish with brisket and pork dinners.

“Everybody loves it. We sell so much of it,” said Vilminot. “People love how it’s packed with the best cheese, bacon, and onions caramelized with our own beer.”

It’s nice to hear those customer compliments. They let the Grand River Brewery team know they’re on the right track to providing patrons with a homelike experience with good, heartwarming food.

It’s even nicer when your customers nominate you for a Best of Jackson award. “We’re honored to be a Best of Jackson finalist,” said Vilminot. “We work really hard with all of our cooks to make sure the mac and cheese is made the same every time with all the components that make it a great dish.” *D*

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2022 Best Homemade Macaroni & Cheese Finalist

THE DIRTY BIRD



The Dirty Bird offers three versions of their macaroni and cheese.
Inset: Tyler Levy, chef.

Experimentation has led to many great creations: the light bulb, the car — and the yummy mac and cheese at the Dirty Bird in downtown Jackson.

Owner Randy LeMaster has a lot of experience managing restaurants and bars. Although he describes himself as more of a restaurateur than a chef, he likes to get involved in creating the menus for his establishments. When he was preparing to open the Dirty Bird, he knew he wanted to add mac and cheese to the menu. He thought it would be a wonderful complement to the restaurant's chicken specialties. But which recipe should he use? Trial and error was the answer.

"I did lots of cooking at home, trying different cheeses, sauces, and noodles," said LeMaster, who also owns the Chase Sports Bar and Tilted Arcade Bar, both located near the Dirty Bird. "I wanted to come up with a nice, creamy, flavorful version that we could cook to order."

Customers craving mac and cheese now have three versions to choose from:

- Classic Mac 'n' Cheese: Cavatappi noodles smothered in gooey house-made cheese sauce, topped with toasted pretzel crumbs



- Buffalo Mac 'n' Cheese: A spicy take on the Classic Mac 'n' Cheese, topped with crispy fried chicken tenders tossed in buffalo sauce
- Chicken Mac 'n' Cheese: Classic Mac 'n' Cheese topped with grilled chicken

LeMaster figured he wasn't the only mac and cheese lover out there, and he was right. It has been a big hit with customers, and it's one of the best-selling sides for dine-in, carryout, parties, and events.

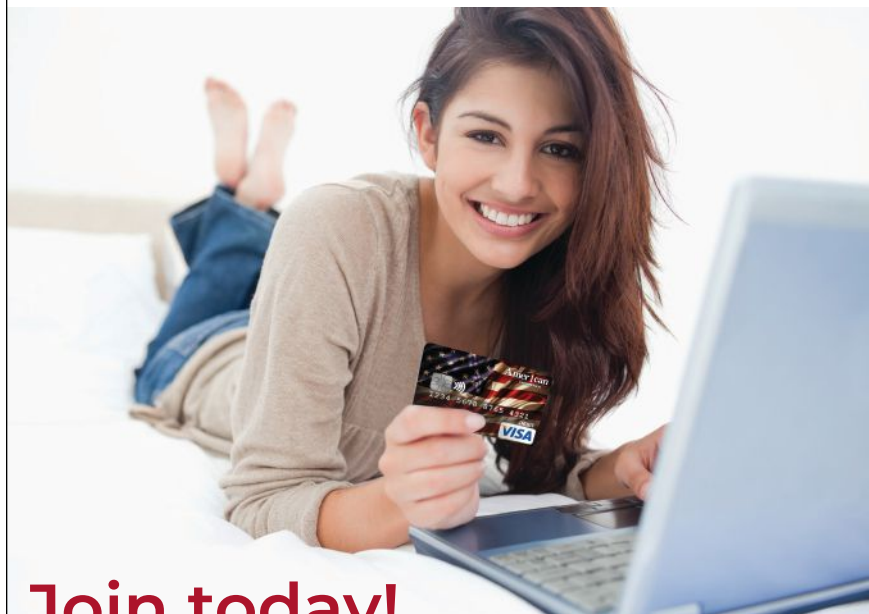
"Chicken is our niche, but lots of people say they're coming in for the mac and cheese. I never knew that would be the draw," said LeMaster. "But when my kids, Kyle and Kadence, said it was good, I knew I was onto something!"

LeMaster hopes customers leave feeling satisfied and share their positive experience with friends and family. His goal is for the restaurant's comfort food and fun atmosphere to bring them back again and again. The Dirty Bird's

nomination as a Best of Jackson finalist shows his approach must be working.

"I'm kind of shocked that we were nominated. We've been a finalist for other things, like our chicken and beer, but I never knew there would be a mac and cheese category," said LeMaster. "Becoming a finalist happened because of the support of the community, and we really appreciate that." *JB*

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