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Gratin of Penne with Artichokes and Four Cheeses

Serves 4

Fresh artichokes are delish in this cheesy macaroni gratin, but the dish is so tasty that if fresh are not available, it is yummy even with frozen artichokes. And if they are not available, it is toothsome even with . . . yes, even with canned artichokes!

A mélange of different cheeses make the dish. I tend to throw it together with whatever small pieces I have on hand: something nutty and good for melting, such as a Comté, Emmenthal, or Gruyère; something slightly cream, such as fontina; a pungent Stilton or Gorgonzola or a mild blue from France or Germany; and to finish it off, something hard and wonderful for grating. When I started making this dish, that last cheese was Parmesan, then I morphed through pecorino, and right now my favorite is halloumi cheese, grated on the fine grate of my cheese grater. It's salty and keeps its lovely character, lending a funkier nature to the gratin.

10 ounces penne, small rigatoni, or thin elbow macaroni (maccheroncini)
About 8 ounces cooked fresh artichoke hearts; frozen artichokes, defrosted; or canned (not marinated) artichokes, rinsed in cold water
3 to 4 cloves garlic, chopped
1/4 cup crème fraîche
3 ounces fontina, shredded
4 ounces Emmenthal, Comté, or Gruyère, shredded
3 ounces Stilton cheese, crumbled
2 to 3 ounces halloumi, pecorino, or Parmesan cheese, grated
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Cook the pasta in a large pot of rapidly boiling salted water until almost al dente. Drain and transfer to a large shallow baking pan. Leave the pasta to cool so it's easier to toss and less likely to fall apart.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Dice the artichokes.

Toss the pasta with the artichokes, garlic, and crème fraîche, Toss in the fontina, Emmenthal, and Stilton, one by one. Before adding the halloumi, set aside 2 to 3 tablespoons. Season with salt and pepper and sprinkle the reserved halloumi over the top.

Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, or until the top is lightly browed and crisped in places and the cheese has melted. Serve immediately.