

Break out of the box: MAC and CHEESE | Tillamook Cheese regional contests yields delicious twists on homemade kitchen classic

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The regional competition in the 2007 Macaroni & Cheese Recipe Contest Cook-Off, sponsored by Tillamook Cheese, was perfectly timed for G.A. of Andersonville, who wrote to say her kids and grandkids could live on macaroni and cheese -- who couldn't? -- but she was bored with her existing recipes.

There wasn't a boring recipe in the recent competition at Luxbar on the Gold Coast, won by Dr. Terry Propper, a root canal specialist from Nashville, Tenn.

Propper, who won \$1,000 in cash and 25 pounds of cheese for her Mi Casa Chicken Pasta, a dish she calls "mac-and-cheese with a Southwestern twist," advances to the finals in December in Portland, Ore.

Debbie Reid, originally from Chicago and now of Florida, competed with Italian Cheese-Stuffed Macaroni and Cheese. (For her recipe, go to www.suntimes.com/food.)

For the no-bake Prosciutto and Spinach Pasta, entered by Sherry Ricci, of Rochester, N.Y.: Melt ½ cup butter in a large saucepan; stir in ½ cup flour until smooth. Cook over low heat for 3 minutes. Whisk in 8 cups hot milk. Cook, stirring constantly, until mixture boils. Reduce heat and cook 10 minutes. Stir in 6 cups shredded Tillamook Vintage White Cheddar Cheese. Set aside.

Cook 2 pounds penne pasta in 2 teaspoons salt, according to package directions. While pasta is cooking, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in skillet; add 6 ounces prosciutto (cut in thin strips). Saute a few minutes. Add 12 ounces baby spinach (julienned); cook 3 more minutes. Toss drained pasta with cheese sauce and spinach mixture. Sprinkle with 4 tablespoons pine nuts (toasted 2 minutes in skillet over medium heat) and 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese as garnishes.