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MELISSA CLARK | A Good Appetite FEB. 18, 2009

Some Well-Planned Wackiness

THERE was a time before I was married when I cooked grand, if slightly offbeat, dinners just for me. I'd throw together whatever ingredients I had around, ending up with ad-hoc salads filled with pickles and scrambled eggs; roasted vegetables slathered with mayonnaise; bowls of rice topped with bacon and tahini.

Cooking for two brought out a less frenetic inner cook. I now think about what I'm going to make before I turn on the stove, and have even been known to scribble a shopping list on occasion.

On the rare night I'm cooking just for one, though, some of my old inclinations return. But they're tempered with my newer, more organized habits. In other words, the wackier combinations persist, but I plan them.

And this is how I came to invent what's been affectionately called my cheesy cauliflower chutney mess.

I started with the idea of cauliflower and peas coated in a cheddar-rich béchamel, a little like macaroni and cheese but with vegetables instead of pasta.

When I pictured the dish, I saw a brain-like cauliflower on a platter coated in gooey sauce and dotted with peas.

But cooking up a whole cauliflower for just one didn't make sense. So I cut the head into florets so I could save some for another night.

Normally, when you see recipes for cheesy cauliflower, the vegetable is boiled. I wanted a deeper flavor, so I roasted the cauliflower, adding the peas to the pan during the last few minutes of cooking.

While it was all in the oven, I worked on the béchamel.

When I first made the dish, I planned to season the cheese sauce with chutney. After all, cheesy cauliflower seemed like the essence of British nursery food. And British food always makes me think of Indian cuisine. A dollop of mango chutney would add complexity and sweet-



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Roasted cauliflower with chutney cheese sauce.

ness, and, I hoped, would mesh well with the cheese flavor in the sauce — a little like the flavors on a fruit and cheese plate but runnier.

I would have sworn up and down I had a jar of Major Grey's in the fridge, but no amount of searching could unearth it. I did spot some Indian lime pickle, so I stirred it into the pot. Instead of being fruity and mellow, the sauce was pungent, bright and dusky tasting, giving a jolt to the mild cauliflower. Not what I had pictured, but terrific in its own intense, funky way, and definitely not nursery food.

Still, I had the mango-spiked version of the dish stuck in my head, and a few months later, I had the chance to try it.

This time, I made a shopping list and remembered the chutney. I stirred some into the cheese sauce, then spooned it over my platter of caramelized cauliflower and green peas. The dish was sweet and tangy from the chutney, but comforting and creamy from the soft vegetables and cheese sauce. And although it could have easily served two, I got to eat it all by myself.

Recipe: Roasted Cauliflower and Peas With Chutney Cheese Sauce Time: 35

minutes

FOR THE CAULIFLOWER:
1 1/2 pound head cauliflower, cut into bite-size florets
3 tablespoons olive oil
3/4 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 cup frozen peas
For the sauce:
1/4 cup unsalted butter (1/2 stick)
1/4 cup flour
3 cups whole milk
1 pound aged white cheddar cheese, grated
1/3 cup mango chutney
1/4 teaspoon dry mustard powder
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
Cooked white rice, for serving
Chopped fresh cilantro, for serving.
1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Toss cauliflower with oil, salt and pepper. Arrange in a single layer on a baking sheet. Roast until almost tender and browning around the edges, about 30 minutes. Add peas to pan and stir to combine. Roast until peas are heated through, about 5 minutes more.
2. About halfway through cauli-

lower cooking time, prepare cheese sauce: Melt butter in a large saucépan over medium-high heat. Add flour and cook, stirring, until mixture is pale golden, about 1 minute. Whisking constantly, slowly add milk until fully incorporated. Bring to a boil and cook until thickened, about 3 minutes. Whisk in cheese, a little at a time (adding too much at once can cause sauce to break and become grainy), until smooth. Stir in chutney, dry mustard, salt and pepper.

3. *Serve vegetables and sauce over rice; garnish with cilantro.*

Yield: 4 servings.

Lime-Pickle Variation: For a spicy, tangy cheese sauce, substitute 1 tablespoon finely chopped lime pickle for the chutney; omit dry mustard. Lime pickle can be found in Middle Eastern and Asian markets. ■