

**PENNY SAVER NEWS**

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### Why Process Cheese?

If you ever looked carefully at the labels in the cheese section of the grocery, you would have every right to be confused. What are they all? There are various kinds of cheese - cheddar, Colby, mozzarella, etc. That's fine. But then there is process cheese, process cheese product, process cheese food, and process cheese spread. Are these really cheese? Why are they different? Do you really want them? Actually, they are different, and very useful!

Cheese itself is actually one of the oldest processed foods. It is processed milk! Depending on the source of the milk - cow, goat, sheep, buffalo, even camel - the results are significantly different. Whether the cheese is aged or fresh, salted or not, made with skim milk, full fat milk or mostly cream, and what else is used to color and flavor the cheese, each cheese is significantly different from every other one. People who love mozzarella on their pizza might never enjoy sharp cheddar with their apple pie. Feta cheese won't be a good substitute for cottage cheese in a salad.

But all of these are 'natural' cheeses. What about process cheese? Process cheese arose from two needs. One, it's a way to make good use of the ends of blocks after cheese is sliced or trimmed. That is good cheese, why waste it because it's not an even slice?

But more importantly, process cheese works better for many of our common foods. If you have ever overcooked a cheese sauce, you might remember the sudden appearance of greasy spots on the top of the pan and lumps of hard, chewy stuff on the bottom. When natural cheese is overheated will can separate and curdle or get tough as shoe leather. If you ever stuck a chunk of cheddar in the freezer, then tried to slice

it later, you ended up with cheese crumbles instead. These are common problems with natural cheeses.

But a manufacturer can put process cheese on a pizza, bake it, freeze it, package it, ship it across the country and sell it to you. When you bake the pizza the cheese is still soft and stretchy just like it should be. A slice of process cheese melted onto that burger keeps its shape, but looks and smells delicious. That's the advantage of process cheese. You can pour, slice, spread or melt it, and it still looks and tastes and feels like cheese.

Process cheese is made by grinding and melting natural cheese. Different kinds may be used, but cheddar and Colby are the most common. After the cheese is melted more milk, cream, salt or other flavoring can be added. The most important addition is an *emulsifier*. An emulsifier is something that allow water and oil to mix. Egg yolk is a good emulsifier, but lecithin extracted from soy beans is used in process cheese. It usually shows up on the label as sodium or potassium phosphate.

By changing the amount of cream, salt and emulsifier the cheese can be made to melt at a low temperature or a high one. It can be made to be stiff enough to slice, or runny enough to pour out of the jar onto the veggies. It can be fixed so that it will freeze and thaw and still melt or slice beautifully. Depending on how much extra milk or cream is added the final product is either a process cheese, or a food, product or spread. There are legal definitions for each one. They all start with cheese, and they all end up looking and tasting like cheese too. But you can do a lot more with them.

Here's a quick and super easy corn and cheese chowder that depends on process cheese for its creamy texture and cheesy flavor. Enjoy!

#### Cheesy Southwestern Chowder

2 Tbsp trans-free margarine	½ C chopped green bell pepper
¼ C chopped green onion	2 ½ tsp chili powder
1 ½ tsp ground cumin	3 to 4 cups skim milk

2 16-oz jars processed cheese spread    1 15 oz can chopped tomatoes

1 15-oz can kidney beans, drained        1 15-oz can whole kernel corn, drained

hot pepper sauce to taste

Melt butter in large kettle. Saute peppers, onions, chili powder and cumin until peppers

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