

Seasonal Eating
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The Power of a Cheese Sauce
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There is something about the power of cheese. Parents often use it to get children to eat their vegetables. That is a tactic that sticks with us as adults. The truth is – cheese makes everything better (kind of like bacon!).

So this month, I'm taking cheese sauce to the next level with a southwestern inspired cheese sauce. A white sauce made with part chicken broth and part milk is flavored with onions, mild green chilies and garlic. Then Monterey Jack cheese is melted in for a perfect cheesy topping for chili rubbed chicken resting on a bed of roasted asparagus.

Spring brings lovely spears of asparagus. The ones I used the other night were fairly large around but super tender and flavorful, so size is not an indicator of tenderness. I've had plenty of pencil thin asparagus that was stringy and tough. Look for tight, firm heads and stalks that aren't dried out looking and try to use it as soon as possible. A little olive oil, salt and pepper is all it needs to roast at 425 degrees just until tender to the fork – you still want a slight crispness. You can eat it just off the pan or use it as a delicious base for the chicken drizzled with the southwest cheese sauce.

Don't be scared off by the length of ingredients. The first eight are just spices for the rub that goes on the chicken. I use this rub on pork also. You can triple or quadruple the recipe and keep in an airtight container to use when needed.

While I've used asparagus here, you could use other spring vegetables like spinach or broccoli as well to complement the chicken and sauce. So if you are looking for a way to spruce up your spring vegetables and take a weeknight dinner to weekend flavor, try a cheese sauce, whether traditional Cheddar or one with a southwest flair.

For more ideas on using seasonal produce, visit the Bedford County Extension website (<https://utextension.tennessee.edu/bedford>) and click on Seasonal Eating.

Southwestern Cheesy Chicken and Asparagus

- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder
- 1/2 teaspoon ground sage
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper

- 4 boneless skinless chicken breasts
- 4 tablespoons butter, divided
- 24-28 fresh asparagus spears
- Olive oil
- 1/2 onion, chopped



1 clove garlic, minced
1 1/2 tablespoons flour
1/4 cup chicken broth
3/4 cup milk
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
1/8 teaspoon black pepper
1 (4-ounce) can chopped mild green chili, drained
1 cup shredded Monterey Jack cheese

In a small bowl stir together the salt, thyme, chili powder, garlic powder, onion powder, sage, cumin and cayenne. Sprinkle both sides of the chicken breasts with the spice mixture. In a medium skillet, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter. Add the chicken breasts, cover and cook over medium high heat for about 12 minutes or until cooked through, turning once.

In the meantime, trim the asparagus and toss with a little olive oil, salt and pepper. Place on a baking sheet and roast at 425 degrees until crisp tender, about 10-12 minutes.

For the sauce, melt the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter in a medium saucepan. Add the onion and garlic and sauté until translucent. Add the flour and cook for a minute. Add the chicken broth, milk, salt and pepper. Whisk and bring to a boil. When thickened, add the chilies and cheese and stir until melted. To serve, place 6-7 spears of asparagus on a plate, top with the chicken and spoon the sauce over the top.