A well-made sauce elevates a simple meal to something very special. Sauces are an essential element in cuisines all over the world.

White sauce or Béchamel (bay-shah-mel) is a basic sauce made from a roux of flour, boiled milk and butter. In France, it is called a “mother sauce” because it is used as an ingredient in the preparation of many soups, casseroles, gravies and other sauces.

When looking for new ideas for weeknight meals, don’t forget white sauce and its variations which can help transform leftovers into an entirely new dish, often better than the original!

The secrets of smooth white sauce are just three: Measure accurately, cook slowly, stir constantly.

THIN WHITE SAUCE

1 tablespoon butter
1 tablespoon flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup milk

MEDIUM WHITE SAUCE

2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup milk

THICK WHITE SAUCE

3 or 4 tablespoons butter
3 tablespoons flour
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup milk

Melt butter in a sauce pan and whisk in flour and salt until absolutely smooth. (Any lumps will remain throughout the preparation.) Gradually stir in cold milk, cooking over direct heat and stirring constantly until sauce boils; reduce heat slightly and continue to stir until sauce becomes smooth and thick. When sauce thickens, simmer for an additional 10 minutes over very-low heat, stirring carefully.

If sauce becomes lumpy, use a rotary beater to blend out lumps or press the sauce through a sieve. Wondra flour may be used to great advantage since this flour does not have a tendency to lump.

CHEESE SAUCE

Make one of the white sauces above, and stir in 1/4 to 1 whole cup of grated Monterey Jack or a sharp Cheddar cheese. Stir until cheese melts. Add a quarter cup of chopped jalapeño peppers for a Nacho cheese sauce.

HORSERADISH SAUCE

Using thin white sauce, add 4 teaspoons of grated prepared horseradish and 1/2 teaspoon dry mustard to 1 cup of sauce. Serve with roast beef or boiled tongue.

SOUR CREAM SAUCE

Add a half cup sour cream to one cup of medium white sauce. Serve with cheese blintzes or potato latkes. Add chopped fresh chives and serve on baked potatoes.

MUSTARD SAUCE

Add 1 teaspoon of prepared mustard to one cup of thin white sauce. Serve with ham.

CUMBERLAND SAUCE

3/4 cup red currant jelly
1/4 cup ruby port wine
Juice and rind of 1 orange
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 tablespoon prepared mustard
1 teaspoon paprika
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger

In a heavy 1-quart saucepan, melt jelly over low heat. Add the wine, orange juice, lemon juice, mustard, paprika and ginger. Simmer for a few minutes until flavors are blended, stirring constantly. Add grated orange rind and continue cooking for 1 minute. Yields 1 cup. Serve over hot poultry or as a sauce over slices of roast pork, or serve cold over sliced ham or turkey.

SIMPLE ALFREDO SAUCE

1/2 cup butter
1 package cream cheese
1 cup half and half
1/3 cup Parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon garlic powder (optional)
Pepper, to taste

In a medium saucepan, melt butter. Once butter is almost melted, add the package of cream cheese. It's easiest to cut it into 4 pieces so that it melts quicker.

Once butter and cream cheese are mixed well together, add the cup of half and half, Parmesan cheese, garlic powder, and then shake pepper on top. Stir all together until well mixed, then take it off the burner and set aside so it can thicken up. Stir every few moments.

Pour over your favorite pasta. Makes about 2 cups of sauce.

HOLLANDAISE SAUCE

Hollandaise sauce uses butter and egg yolks as binding. It is served hot with vegetables, fish, and eggs (like egg benedict). It will be a pale lemon color and should have a buttery-smooth texture, almost frothy, and an aroma of good butter. Making it can be a little tricky, something you wouldn't want to try for the first time when having dinner guests over.

4 egg yolks
1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
1/2 cup unsalted butter, melted (1 stick)
Pinch cayenne
Pinch salt

Vigorously whisk the egg yolks and lemon juice together in a stainless steel bowl and until the mixture is thickened and doubled in volume.

Place the bowl over a saucepan containing barely simmering water (or use a double boiler,) the water should not touch the bottom of the bowl. Continue to whisk rapidly. Be careful not to let the eggs get too hot or they will scramble.

Slowly drizzle in the melted butter and continue to whisk until the sauce is thickened and doubled in volume. Remove from heat, whisk in cayenne and salt. Cover and place in a warm spot until ready to use for the eggs benedict. If the sauce gets too thick, whisk in a few drops of

warm water before serving. Yields 1 cup.

FRESH MINT SAUCE

2 tablespoons water
2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar
1 cup mint leaves
1/2 cup white vinegar

In a small saucepan, boil water and sugar together to make a syrup. Remove from heat and let cool. Finely chop mint leaves and add to syrup along with the vinegar. Pour into a small bowl or pitcher and let stand at least one hour before servings. Yields about 3/4 cup of sauce. Serve with lamb or to enhance fresh-cooked peas or drizzle over sliced cucumbers.