

# Älplermagronen

## Yield & Timing

**Serves:** 10–12 (side-dish portions)

**Active time:** ~25 minutes • **Bake/Reheat:** ~20 minutes • **Make-ahead:** Excellent

## Tools & Equipment

- Measuring cups & spoons; **digital kitchen scale** (for accuracy)
- Large **6–8 qt (5–7 L) pot** + **colander**
- 10–12 in (26–30 cm) wide sauté pan or skillet (for onions)
- 13×9 in (33×23 cm) or 3–4 L **baking dish** (covered, if possible)
- Cutting board & chef's knife; vegetable peeler
- Heatproof spatula / wooden spoon; whisk
- Cheese grater (medium/fine); micro plane (optional, for nutmeg)
- Foil or lid for transport; insulated carrier (optional)

## Ingredients

### Pasta & Potatoes

- **Dry short pasta** (elbows or penne): **450 g / 1 lb** (*≈ 3½ cups elbows or ≈ 5 cups penne*).
- **Waxy potatoes**, peeled & ½-in (1.25 cm) dice: **450 g / 1 lb** (*≈ 3 cups diced*)
- **Salt** for pasta water: **1 Tbsp / 17 g** (or to taste)

### Cheese & Cream

- **Gruyère**, grated: **200 g / ~2 cups loosely packed**
- **Emmental or Appenzeller**, grated: **200 g / ~2 cups loosely packed**
- **Heavy cream**: **360 ml / 1½ cups**
- **Whole milk**: **240 ml / 1 cup**
- **Ground nutmeg**: **½ tsp**
- **White pepper** (or finely ground black pepper): **¼ tsp**
- **Fine salt**, to taste

### Onion Topping

- **Yellow onions**, thin half-rings (~⅛ in / 3 mm): **450–500 g / 2 large** (*≈ 4 cups sliced*)
- **Butter**: **42 g / 3 Tbsp**
- **Olive oil**: **15 ml / 1 Tbsp**
- Optional: **paprika** (½ tsp) for color

### Traditional Side

- **Applesauce**: **1.0–1.2 L / 4–5 cups**

# Cooking Process

## 1. Cook potatoes & pasta together

Bring a large pot of well-salted water to a boil. Add **diced potatoes**; simmer **5 minutes**. Add **pasta** to the same pot and cook to **al dente** (check package for time as the shape, size, and density of the pasta will vary the cooking time; usually 6–8 minutes more). Drain well.

## 2. Make the cheese sauce

Warm **cream + milk** in a saucepan (do not boil). Off heat, whisk in **grated cheeses** by handfuls until smooth and glossy. Season with **nutmeg, pepper, and salt** to taste.

- Optional: add a splash of **white wine** for acidity.
- Optional: make the cheese sauce as a roux by melting **2 Tbsp butter** in a saucepan, whisking in **2 Tbsp flour** and cooking 1–2 minutes; then slowly whisking in warm **milk + cream** until smooth before adding cheese.

## 3. Caramelize the onions

In a wide skillet over **medium heat**, melt **butter + oil**. Add **onions** and a pinch of salt. Cook, stirring often, until **deep golden with crisp edges** (15–20 minutes).

- Optional: finish with a splash of water to deglaze; dust with **paprika**.

## 4. Assemble & bake

- Heat oven to **190°C / 375°F**. Lightly butter a **13×9 in / 3–4 L** baking dish.
- Layer: half the **pasta & potatoes** → half the **cheese sauce** → repeat.
  - Top evenly with **caramelized onions**.
  - Bake **15–20 minutes** until bubbling. Onions should be golden and crisp.

## 5. Serve

Set out **applesauce** on the side so guests can spoon **2–4 Tbsp** alongside each portion.

# Final tips

- **Undercook pasta by ~1 minute** so it stays al dente after baking.
- **Season the sauce fully** before layering, potatoes mute salt.
- **Hold onions separately** and add on top **right before baking** for the best crisp.

# Variations

- **Cheese choices:** Gruyère is classic; Emmental or Appenzeller add sweetness/tang. Appenzeller's famous **herbal brine** wash gives lift; blend to taste.
- **Uri variation:** In the **canton of Uri**, versions skip the potatoes and cook pasta **in milk**—also traditional.
- **Pepper:** White pepper is traditional but **fine black pepper** works perfectly.
- **Uri (Urner) variation** – *milk-cooked, no potatoes*  
Pasta is cooked directly **in milk**, then mixed with cheese; topped with fried onions; traditionally served with cooked apples. **No potatoes** in this variant.
- **Obwalden variation** – *Sbrinz + cream, layered or one-pot*  
Uses **Sbrinz** (the hard, nutty grating cheese) and **cream**; often layers pasta/potatoes with cheese and pours warm cream over, finished with **Röstzwiebeln**. (Some recipes note you can substitute ready-fried onions.)
- **Graubünden (Bündner) variation** – *Alpkäse / Bergkäse* - Calls for **Alpkäse** (mountain cheese) or **Bergkäse**, with cream; otherwise a classic build with onions and applesauce.
- **Appenzell variation** – *Appenzeller cheese; sometimes with sausage* - Leans on **Appenzeller** (mild→extra-würzig). Some local recipes suggest serving **Siedwurst** alongside; applesauce is still standard.
- **With or without bacon (Speck)** - Many Swiss recipes include **Speckwürfeli** (bacon lardons) on top; others keep it vegetarian. Both are common at home and in mountain huts.
- **Onion treatment—two schools**
  - **Crispy fried rings** or **Röstzwiebeln** (classic chalet vibe).
  - **“Zwiebelschwitze”**: onions lightly tossed in flour, then browned for a toasty, slightly thicker topping.
- **One-pot vs. layered/baked** - Some cook everything **in one pot** (milk/cream + pasta + potatoes), others **layer** and pop in the oven a few minutes to meld. Both are authentic.
- **Side: applesauce, plum, and pear** - Applesauce is the default everywhere; you'll also find **plum compote** in some families/regions. Pears are also common in northern Switzerland along the Rhine.

# A Short History of Älplermagronen

## What it is

**Älplermagronen**—literally “**herdsmen’s macaroni**”—is a hearty Alpine dish of **pasta, potatoes, cream, cheese, and onions**, typically served with **applesauce**. It’s widely regarded as a classic of Swiss mountain cooking, with regional variations across the Alps.

## How it took shape

- A **popular story** links the dish’s rise to the **Gotthard rail era (1880s)**, when Italian workers and the new tunnel helped spread **dry pasta** into the high Alps—ideal for huts because it was light and kept well.
- The 15th century cook from Ticino, Maestro Martino, describe macaroni recipes in his book: *Libro de arte coquinaria*. His *macaronis* are seasoned with butter and cheese, and sweet spices (Cinnamon, Cloves, Nutmeg, Mace, Ginger, Saffron, and Pepper). In the early 16th century, Ticino was annexed by the Old Swiss Confederacy. In 1731, the Disentis monastery purchased and imported a “*torculum pro formandis macaronis*” (press for forming macaroni). **Pasta production was common in Lucerne** by the 1800s.
- Onions are a beloved, storied ingredient in Switzerland—most famously celebrated at **Bern’s Zibelemärit (Onion Market)** each **fourth Monday in November**, where tens of thousands of visitors buy onion braids and enjoy **onion tart (Zibelechueche)** and onion soup. That tradition underscores why **golden fried onions** feel so “right” on Älplermagronen.
- Switzerland’s **Alpine transhumance**—moving herds up to high pastures in summer—created a culture of making **cheese on the alp** to preserve milk. Swiss hard-cheese traditions are documented from the **12th century** (e.g., **Gruyère**), with medieval and early-modern sources referencing cheesemaking in Gruyère and Emmental; cheese even circulated as **payment** and trade across passes into the Mediterranean. During the Roman era, **Pliny the Elder** noted that the **Helvetii** (ancient Swiss) made a hard cheese similar to modern Emmental.
- Potatoes reached Europe in the **late sixteenth century**, and in **1596** the Basel botanist **Caspar Bauhin** recorded the scientific name ***Solanum tuberosum***. In Switzerland, early plantings spread through **Alpine and pre-Alpine** districts between **1697 and 1730**. In the **late eighteenth century**, Enlightenment reformers—often called “**economic patriots**” in Zurich—promoted **seed potatoes, new varieties**, and **potato breads** to strengthen food security. The **hunger crisis of 1770–71** accelerated adoption, and the “**Year Without a Summer**” (**1816–17**)—triggered by the Tambora eruption—cemented potatoes as a staple thanks to their reliable yields. As **tithes and rigid three-field rules** faded and **crop rotation** spread, potatoes became firmly embedded in Swiss agriculture and daily cooking.