

Potatoes are a maligned vegetable, condemned as fattening, boring, empty-caloried. Not so! Potatoes are high in vitamin C and potassium and provide significant amounts of vitamin B6 and iron in human diets. Because of their association with fast food, however, they aren't often given the serious consideration they should receive as thrifty, delicious, and healthy. This month's 3 Days, 3 Ways celebrates the baking potato with several super-easy, fast dishes that give it the attention it deserves.

Potato Varieties

The classic American baking potato is the Russet Burbank, a brown-skinned, torpedo-shaped potato used for every fast-food French fry. Its high starch content makes splendid, fluffy baked and mashed potatoes. Beyond those dishes, the Russet Burbank has limited use because it falls apart easily in soups, sauces, and stews. For that reason, we suggest you use a gold potato, like a Yukon Gold or Yellow Finn, which bakes up magnificently but also performs beautifully in other kinds of dishes.

Basic Baked Potato

*Because most of a potato's protein, vitamins, and minerals are located immediately beneath the skin, it's a good idea to bake potatoes in their jackets. If you have reasons to remove the skin for the dish you're preparing, scoop out the flesh but don't throw out the jacket—with a sliver of butter and a few garlic granules inserted, it's a fine snack, and children delight in it. Do not bake your potatoes in tin foil—doing so steams, not bakes, them. It can also be a health hazard (see **Safety Tip** below.)*

Ingredients: 4 lbs. of baking potatoes, preferably large gold potatoes
1–2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
1 Tbsp. sea salt
Ground black pepper

- Preheat oven to 425°.
- In a large bowl, toss the whole potatoes with olive oil, salt, and pepper.
- Set potatoes in a single layer on a heavy baking sheet or in a shallow pan. Bake, turning them occasionally so their skins crisp on all sides, until they can be easily pierced by a knife (25–40 minutes).

Safety Tip: *Many a home and restaurant case of foodborne illness has been traced to potatoes baked and stored in aluminum foil. Why? Because the tight seal formed by the foil creates the low-oxygen condition that promotes the growth of deadly bacteria when it is allowed to cool and be stored in the foil. If you add to that the warm, moist condition of the potato's interior and the abundant starch available for microorganisms to feed on, you've created ideal conditions for runaway bacterial growth. If you must use foil, be sure to remove it promptly after baking and always refrigerate leftover potatoes.*

Day 1: Topped Baked Potatoes

When you first pull your baked spuds from the oven, you owe yourself an immediate meal of them. This is the baked potato classic: a spud that's been sliced open lengthwise, its insides fluffed with a fork and seasoned, then topped with something hearty and highly seasoned to contrast with the bland heartiness of the potato. Here are several super-easy toppings beyond the obvious ones of sour cream and butter.

Cilantro-Lemon-Greek Yogurt Potatoes

Ingredients: 1/2 bunch fresh cilantro leaves
1 c. plain, whole-fat Greek yogurt (Greek Gods brand is terrific)
1–2 tsp. fresh lemon juice

- Mince up cilantro; stir into plain yogurt; add lemon juice.
- Slit potatoes open and fluff up their starchy interiors with a fork. Season with salt and pepper. Top with yogurt mixture.

Olive Tapenade-Mascarpone Potatoes

Ingredients: 1/3 c. Holy Land olive tapenade
1/2 c. mascarpone cheese
1 Tbsp. Italian parsley
Squeeze of fresh lemon juice

- Stir together tapenade and mascarpone; add minced parsley and lemon juice.
- Slit potatoes open and fluff up their starchy interiors with a fork. Season with salt and pepper. Top with tapenade mixture.

Pesto Potatoes

Ingredients: 1/2 c. Mississippi Market cilantro or basil pesto
Handful of toasted pine nuts

- Slit potatoes open and fluff up their starchy interiors with a fork. Season with salt and pepper. Top with pesto; sprinkle with pine nuts.

Day 2: Buttermilk Mashed Potatoes

No comfort food excels real mashed potatoes—and no mashed potatoes excel those that started by being baked. Buttermilk adds piquancy to mashed potatoes. First mash your spuds (skin-on is very tasty and more nutritious), salt them well (potatoes are real salt sinks—they take a lot of salt, but add it bit by bit), then add any seasonings you wish to perk up the flavor.

Ingredients: 1 1/2 lbs. gold or russet potatoes
Sea salt & freshly ground pepper
2–4 Tbsp. butter or extra-virgin olive oil
1/2 c. warm buttermilk

Seasonings:
Freshly grated nutmeg (*optional*)
1 Tbsp. fresh horseradish (*optional*)
1 head roasted garlic (*optional*)

- Peel skins off baked potatoes (or not), then cut into chunks and mash. *Don't use a food processor, because the potatoes will not stay fluffy; they'll become gray and gluey.*
- When potatoes have become mostly mashed, add butter or olive oil; start adding salt and tasting after each addition of it.
- Begin adding warm buttermilk, stirring well after each addition, until you achieve the texture you like. Taste; add pepper, perhaps nutmeg.
- If you want a kick to the potatoes, add fresh grated horseradish and/or the mashed cloves from a head of roasted garlic (this can be roasted along with the potatoes).

Cooking Tip: If potatoes are stored alongside onions, they will quickly rot. Be sure to store them in a separate drawer or cabinet.

Day 3: Refried Potatoes with Pancetta and Greens

This very simple dish takes no more than 10 minutes to make, but its taste is memorable. You can dress it up by first frying the pancetta with thinly sliced leaves of lacinato kale or chard, or you can fry the potatoes directly in the fat from the pancetta.

Ingredients: 1 1/2 lbs. baked gold or russet potatoes, cold
1–2 slices of Mississippi Market pancetta
1 shallot
Extra-virgin olive oil
1/2 c. lacinato kale or chard leaves
Dried red pepper flakes
1–2 Tbsp. Italian parsley
Sea salt & freshly ground black pepper
Fresh lemon, lime, or apple cider vinegar

- Slice each potato lengthwise, then cut into 1-inch cubes. You can leave the skins on or remove them
- Cut 1 or 2 slices of MM pancetta crosswise into little matchsticks. Heat a wok or large frying pan on medium-high, then add pancetta and fry until its fat is released and the pancetta is crispy.
- Mince shallot and add to pan. (If more fat is needed, add a bit of olive oil by drizzling it down the side of the pan so it is hot by the time it touches the food.)
- If you are using lacinato kale, add it now, thinly sliced (thick stem discarded), and stir until it starts to soften. Then add potato cubes; allow them to sit for 1 minute before gently moving the cubes around. Brown them on all sides.
- If you are using chard, cut it into thin ribbons (don't add the stems; they are too watery for this dish) and add to the pan after the potatoes have browned. Chard will cook in only 1–2 minutes.
- Add pepper flakes, parsley, salt, and pepper. Taste to see if more salt is needed. Just before serving, add a little squeeze of lemon or lime juice or a bit of apple cider vinegar.