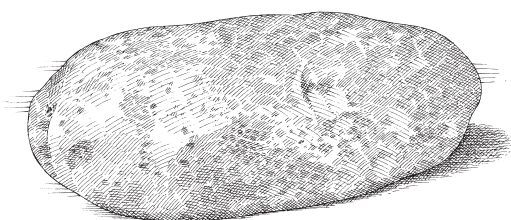


Potato Primer

Think all potatoes are the same? Think again. Here are the basic information and cooking techniques you need to know for perfect mashed, roasted, boiled, and baked potatoes every time. BY KEITH DRESSER

POTATO VARIETIES

Until recently, most markets sold potatoes under generic names, such as “baking potato” or “boiling potato,” which helped shoppers choose the right potato for each recipe. But now many markets sell potatoes by varietal name, such as Yukon Gold and Red Creamer. So how do you use these potatoes? We find that potato varieties can be divided into three major categories based on texture. What causes different potatoes to have different textures? In a word, starch.

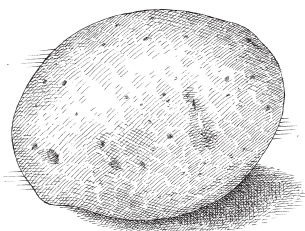


DRY, FLOURY POTATOES

What You Need to Know: Also known as “baking” potatoes, this group contains more total starch (20 percent to 22 percent) and amylose than other categories, giving these varieties a dry, mealy texture.

How to Use Them: The best choice when baking and frying. In our opinion, they are also the best potatoes for mashing, because they can drink up butter and cream. Good when you want to thicken a stew or soup but not if you want distinct chunks of potatoes.

Common Varieties: **RUSSET, RUSSET BURBANK, IDAHO**

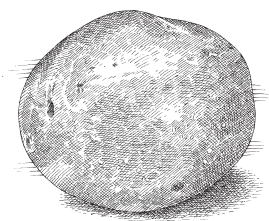


“IN-BETWEEN” POTATOES

What You Need to Know: These potatoes contain less total starch (18 percent to 20 percent) and amylose than dry, floury potatoes but more total starch and amylose than firm, waxy potatoes. Although they are “in-between” potatoes, their texture is more mealy than firm, putting them closer to dry, floury potatoes.

How to Use Them: They can be mashed or baked but won’t be as fluffy as dry, floury potatoes; they can be used in salads and soups but won’t be quite as firm as waxy potatoes.

Common Varieties: **YUKON GOLD, YELLOW FINN, PURPLE PERUVIAN, KENNEBEC, KATAHDIN**



FIRM, WAXY POTATOES

What You Need to Know: Also known as “boiling” potatoes, these contain a relatively low amount of total starch (16 percent to 18 percent) and very little amylose, which means they have a firm, smooth, waxy texture. Freshly dug potatoes, which are often called “new” potatoes, fall into this group.

How to Use Them: Perfect when you want the potatoes to hold their shape, as with potato salad; also a good choice when roasting or boiling.

Common Varieties: **RED BLISS, FRENCH FINGERLING, RED CREAMER, WHITE ROSE**

WHY ARE MY POTATOES GREEN?

The green patches found on some potatoes are caused by prolonged exposure to light or improper storage. This discoloration is produced by chlorophyll and is usually an indication of increased levels of a naturally occurring toxic alkaloid called *solanine*. Ingesting solanine can lead to illness, so if you discover green patches when peeling your potatoes, simply cut off the affected areas.

BUYING AND STORING

BUYING

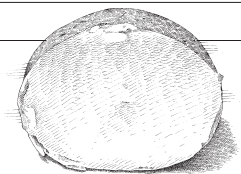
Look for firm specimens that are free of green spots, sprouts, cracks, and other blemishes. We generally prefer to buy loose potatoes, so we can see what we are getting. Stay away from potatoes in plastic bags, which can act like greenhouses and cause potatoes to sprout, soften, and rot.

STORING

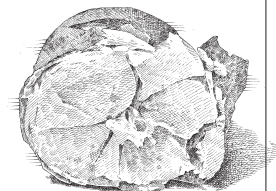
If stored under unsuitable heat and light circumstances, potatoes will germinate and grow. To avoid this, keep potatoes in a cool, dark, dry place. Although some experts warn that refrigerating potatoes can dramatically increase the sugar level, we’ve never encountered this problem in the test kitchen. Store potatoes in a paper (not plastic) bag and away from onions, which give off gases that will hasten sprouting. Most varieties should keep for several months. The exception is new potatoes—because of their thinner skins, they will keep no more than one month.

THE STARCH MATTERS

Total starch content in potatoes can range from 16 percent to 22 percent. But just as important as the total amount of starch is the type of starch. There are two kinds of starch molecules—amylose and amylopectin—and they behave quite differently. Amylose molecules, which are shaped like long chains, easily separate when cooked in the presence of water. This explains why russet potatoes, which have a high amount of amylose, are the best choice for mashing. In contrast, amylopectin molecules have a compact, branched shape that holds together when cooked and helps the potato remain intact. Varieties with more amylopectin, such as Red Bliss, are the best choice for boiling.



RED BLISS POTATO
Remains Firm When Cooked



RUSSET POTATO
Turns Crumbly When Cooked

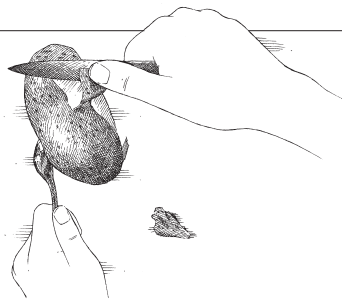
NEW VERSUS OLD POTATOES

Potatoes can be categorized as “new” or “early” potatoes and “old” or “main crop” potatoes. Both new and old potatoes can come from any variety of potato. New potatoes are thin-skinned, less mature potatoes harvested in the late spring and summer. They are less starchy than “old” potatoes, because they haven’t had time to convert their sugar into starch. These potatoes should be used as firm, waxy potatoes, regardless of variety. Old potatoes are fully mature and are harvested in the fall. They are usually starchier and have thick skins. These potatoes are often held in cold storage, or cured, in order for their skins to toughen, which helps protect their flesh for better storage. Most potatoes sold in supermarkets have been cured and can be considered “old” potatoes.

COOKING POTATOES

MASHED

Start with dry, floury potatoes and simmer them with their peels on. Yes, this is more work than the usual peel-and-dice method, but keeping water out ensures fluffy mashed potatoes with an earthy flavor. It is also important when mixing the potatoes to add the melted butter before the half-and-half. When butter is added before the half-and-half, the fat coats the starch molecules, inhibiting their interaction with the water in the half-and-half. The result is a silkier, creamier mashed potato.



Peeling Hot Potatoes

The most efficient way to peel a just-boiled potato is to spear it with a fork and then use a paring knife to remove the peel.

IF YOU MUST PEEL

Over the years, we've tried many different peelers, and we recommend the OXO 1-Series Swivel Peeler (\$10). This sturdy, maneuverable, and incredibly sharp peeler simply outdoes the competition.



BASIC POTATO RECIPES

MASHED POTATOES SERVES 4

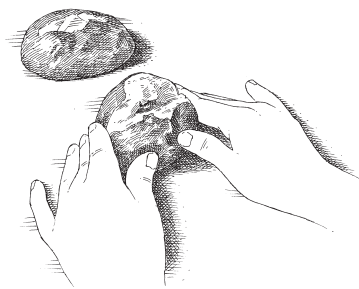
Place 2 pounds scrubbed (and unpeeled) dry, floury potatoes in large saucepan with cold water to cover by about 1 inch. Bring to boil, then simmer over medium-low heat until tender and fully cooked (see illustration below), 20 to 30 minutes. Drain and peel potatoes. Mill, rice, or mash potatoes (see "Three Tools for Mashing"). Stir in 8 tablespoons melted unsalted butter, followed by 1 cup warm half-and-half. Season with 1 1/2 teaspoons table salt and ground black pepper to taste.

BAKED

Start with a dry, floury potato and bake it at a relatively low temperature, which allows some of the starch in the flesh just inside the skin to break down into sugar and gives the potato a rich flavor. To ensure that the flesh does not steam and become dense, open a baked potato as soon as it comes out of the oven.

Opening a Baked Potato

Use the tines of a fork to make a dotted X on top of each potato. Press in at the ends of the potato to push the flesh up and out. Besides releasing the steam quickly, this method helps trap and hold on to bits of butter.



BAKED POTATOES SERVES 4

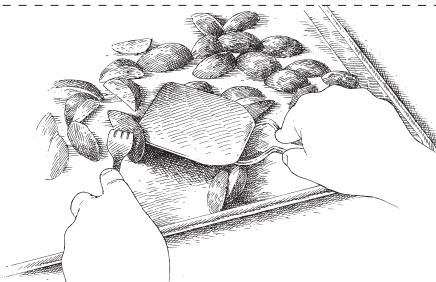
Place 4 medium dry, floury potatoes directly on middle rack in 350-degree oven. Bake potatoes until skewer glides easily through flesh, about 1 hour and 15 minutes. Open immediately (see illustration at left), and serve with butter and salt.

ROASTED

Start with waxy potatoes (they have more moisture than other varieties) and cover the pan with foil for the first half of the roasting time so the potatoes steam in their own moisture and become creamy. Remove the foil and continue roasting until the exteriors are crisp.

Flipping Roast Potatoes

Press a metal spatula against the pan as you slide it under the potatoes to protect the crisp crust. Flip the potatoes so that the other cut sides come in contact with the hot pan.



ROASTED POTATOES SERVES 4

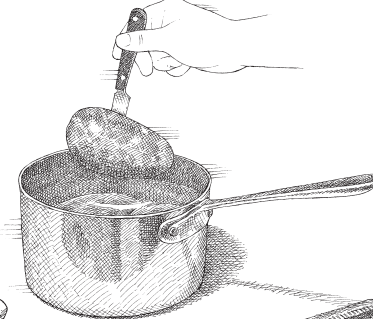
Toss 2 pounds firm, waxy potatoes, cut into 3/4-inch wedges, with 3 tablespoons olive oil, salt, and pepper. Place potatoes flesh side down on rimmed baking sheet and cover tightly with foil. Cook potatoes on middle rack in 425-degree oven for 20 minutes. Remove foil and continue to roast until sides of potatoes touching pan are golden brown, about 15 minutes. Carefully turn potatoes over and continue to roast until golden brown on the second side, 5 to 10 minutes.

BOILED

Start with firm, waxy potatoes and boil them with their skin intact. Toss with butter and serve, or, for salad, cut and toss potatoes with vinegar, salt, and pepper. This technique allows the potatoes to easily absorb the vinegar, creating a fuller-flavored salad.

Is It Done Yet?

Poke the potato with a sharp paring knife and then try to lift it out of the water. If the potato clings to the knife even for a second, back into the pot it goes.

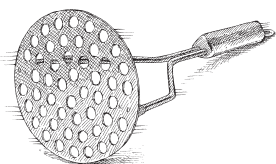


BOILED POTATOES SERVES 4

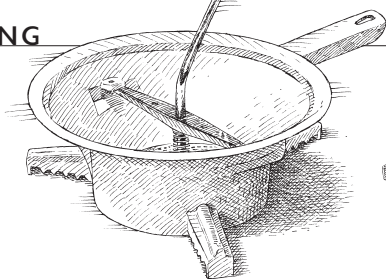
Place 2 pounds scrubbed firm, waxy potatoes in large saucepan with cold water to cover by about 1 inch. Bring to boil, then simmer over medium-low heat until tender, at least 10 minutes for 1-inch potatoes and up to 18 minutes for 2 1/2-inch potatoes. Drain and toss with butter.

FOR SALAD: Cool potatoes slightly, cut with serrated knife into 3/4-inch chunks, and place on rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle with 1/4 cup red wine vinegar, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Let stand for 20 minutes, then transfer to bowl and dress as desired.

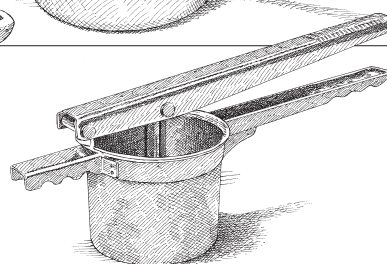
THREE TOOLS FOR MASHING



HAND MASHER: For chunky, home-style mashed potatoes, the tool of choice is a hand masher. These mashers come in all shapes and styles, but our choice is the Profi Plus Masher (\$15.99). With its perforated disk and comfortable grip, the Profi mashes potatoes with minimum effort.



FOOD MILL: Part food processor and part sieve, a food mill quickly produces silky mashed potatoes while separating out any stray peels. Of the food mills tested in the kitchen, our favorite is the R.S.V.P. Rotary Food Mill (\$19.95).



RICER: Like a food mill, the ricer purees the potato while removing any unwanted skins. The drawback to a ricer is that its hopper is quite small and it requires a fair amount of elbow grease, which makes processing a large batch of potatoes laborious. Our favorite is the Cuisipro Potato Ricer (\$29.95).