



# A Perfectly Baked Potato

Piercing the outside before baking ensures a fluffy inside

BY MOLLY STEVENS

**W**hen it comes to basic cooking skills, baking a potato may be right up there with boiling water. But unlike the latter, an aura of mystery about how best to bake a potato persists. The ideal—a fluffy, light, and white center surrounded by a crisp, papery skin—isn't difficult to achieve. In fact, the more you work at making the best baked potato—wrapping it in foil, impaling it with skewers, baking it on a bed of salt—the more likely you are to come away disappointed.

## EENY, MEENY, MINEY, MO— PICK THE BEST POTATO

Using the right variety of potato makes a huge difference in the flavor and texture of a baked potato. What you're looking for is one with a high starch content, often called a “mealy” potato. The starchier the potato, the more the inside swells and puffs up as it bakes, leaving it light, dry, and delicate.

**Choose potatoes with these names on the label: russet, russet Burbank, or Idaho.** Round white potatoes and yellow varieties such as Yellow Finn and Yukon Gold are considered all-purpose potatoes. They have a moderate starch

content and will do in a pinch. Stay away from low-starch potatoes, also called waxy potatoes, which will end up soggy and dense when baked. Don't use potatoes labeled Red Bliss, red, round red, or long white.

**Look for skin that's smooth and tight.** Avoid potatoes with shriveled or cracked skin or with soft, spongy spots. If the eyes have sprouted, or if there are green spots under the skin, the potato was improperly stored, and its quality may have suffered.

Choose potatoes close in size so that they'll cook evenly. A russet generally weighs  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  pound—enough for one

*Oven baking produces light, fluffy potatoes, while baking in foil or in the microwave can leave potatoes soggy.*

Photos: Susan Kahn

or two servings, depending on how you prepare it.

The best seasons for russets are late summer through winter, but modern cultivation and storing methods ensure good-quality potatoes year-round.

Unless you have a root cellar that holds food between 45° and 50°F, plan to store your potatoes for no more than a couple of weeks. They're best kept away from light in a basket or bag that allows air to circulate. Don't store them next to onions; side by side, they shorten each other's shelf life.



*Poke small holes all over the potato to allow some moisture to escape. This makes the potato's flesh fluffy and dry.*

### WASH AND BAKE

One of the joys of baking a potato is the sheer simplicity of it. Your only goal is to make sure the potato loses enough moisture during cooking to leave you with a light potato, not a soggy one.

All you really need to do is scrub the potato, pierce it, and bake it right on the rack of a hot oven. Stabbing the potato several times with the tines of a fork before baking allows moisture to escape, which gives you a light, dry interior. Some cooks claim it's better to pierce the skin after 20 minutes of baking, but I find that it makes no difference to the potato's taste or texture. It is easier to pierce a partially cooked potato, however, so you may want to try that method.

While many cooks swear by skewering potatoes or nesting them on a bed of salt as they bake, I don't bother with either. Skewering the potato may shave about 10 minutes off your baking time, so if you're in a rush, it might be the way to go. Laying potatoes on a bed of coarse salt will draw out excess moisture, but that's only important if you're using less starchy potatoes that won't dry out on their own.

If you like the potato skin crisp, leave it alone. If you like a softer, pliable jacket, lightly rub the skin with a little olive oil, butter, or lard before baking; this will also add a little flavor to the potato.

Once the potatoes are in the oven, there isn't much to do except turn them every 15 to 20 minutes to ensure that they bake evenly.

**Potatoes won't really bake in foil or in the microwave.** While both methods may shorten cooking time, neither allows moisture to escape. Foil traps the moisture so the potato steams rather than

bakes, leaving the interior dense and gummy. Likewise, the microwave keeps potatoes moist.

### OVEN TEMPERATURE CAN ADAPT TO THE REST OF THE MEAL

You can bake potatoes at 325° to 475°F; they'll just take more or less time. If you have a roast in the oven, simply bake your potatoes at the same temperature that the meat requires. The temperatures and times in the chart below

are a guide. To test baked potatoes for doneness, squeeze them with an oven mitt or kitchen towel. When they give slightly and feel soft, they're done.

**For best flavor and texture, serve the baked potato immediately.** A perfectly baked potato won't stay that way for long. If allowed to sit, it will quickly go limp.

Lightly massage the potato just before cutting it open to loosen the inside, making it fluffier. Then slit the top and push

### TEMPERATURES AND TIMES FOR BAKED POTATOES

*For a medium-sized (8- to 10-ounce) potato,*

<i>bake it at</i>	<i>for</i>
325°F	1 hour and 30 minutes
350°F	1 hour and 15 minutes
375°F	1 hour
400°F	45 to 50 minutes
425°F	40 to 45 minutes

on both ends to plump the flesh. Drop in a pat of butter, sprinkle with salt and pepper, and grab a fork. Baked russets are notoriously thirsty and will soak up as much butter and sour cream as you want to use. I also like to top them with salsa, seasoned yogurt, or fresh vegetables.

*Molly Stevens keeps a ready store of russet potatoes in the root cellar at her home in Vermont. She is a contributing editor for Fine Cooking.* ♦

## Twice-baked potatoes make a meal

If you can't serve baked potatoes right away, or if you want to dress them up a bit, consider the classic twice-baked method.

### Begin with a baked potato.

Cut the cooked potato lengthwise in half or just cut off the top. Scoop out the flesh, being careful not to scoop so deeply that the jacket falls apart. Use a food mill or potato masher to mash the flesh—a food processor or mixer would make it gluey—and add milk, cream, butter, sour cream, yogurt, cheese, olive oil, or any combination of these to get a creamy, smooth consistency. From there, use your imagination to mix and match flavorings. Here are some of my favorite combinations:

- ♦ smoked trout, chopped scallions, fresh dill, horseradish, sour cream, and capers;
- ♦ roasted garlic, goat cheese, fresh thyme, olive oil, and black olives, with a topping of grated Parmesan;
- ♦ crabmeat, chives, sour cream, Cheddar cheese, corn, chopped onion, and red pepper;
- ♦ crumbled bacon, sautéed kale and leeks, minced garlic, milk, and caraway seed.

### And bake it again.

Spoon the well-seasoned potato mixture back into the jackets, mounding the filling without compressing it too much, top with grated cheese if you want a browned crust, and bake for 15 minutes at 375°F. These potatoes can be prepared ahead and refrigerated for a few days, or even frozen. In either case, allow 40 to 45 minutes to reheat cold potatoes. Serve one half as a side dish or a whole potato as a main course.

