

Great Mashed Potatoes

Choosing the right potato is the key to a fine mash

BY DAVID EVERETT



For the best mashed potatoes, choose one of these russet varieties. At left, the Yukon Gold; center, "blue" potatoes, which are identical in texture to Yukons; and right, the classic Idaho potato. The author prefers Yukons for their starchy texture, golden color, and natural sweetness.

It's time people realized that creating perfect mashed potatoes is a worthy pursuit. Mashed potatoes are no ordinary side dish. Sure you can find a scoop of mash on just about any blue-plate special, but really good mashed potatoes aren't easy to come by. In my kitchen, I do more than boil and crush spuds for easy consumption; I use mashed potatoes to accompany everything from sautéed duck breast to rack of lamb.

GREAT MASHING POTATOES

My definition of a perfect mashed potato is one that's smooth, thick, and full of flavor. Toward that end, I use a potato that's dry and starchy. Russets, with their low water content, are ideal. Idahoes are the most common russet variety, but also look for Yukon Golds (which usually are yellowish, but even come in shades of purple and blue). For my money, the Yukon is the most noble potato. Thin-skinned but starchy, uniform in size and shape, it has a beautiful buttery color and a flavor that's naturally sweet. Seek potatoes that are dull and dusty yet plump and full, regular in shape, and without cuts, bruises, shriveling, or sprouting.

Some people like new potatoes and fingerlings (small, skinny varieties) that have been mashed with

their skins, but these potatoes have a water content that makes them fit for frying, boiling, and steaming, but not for creating mashed potatoes with the texture I want.

No matter which potatoes you choose, store them in a dark, well-ventilated place. Room temperature is ideal. Refrigerated, potatoes begin to convert their starch to sugar, which causes soft and wrinkled skin, mealiness, and a loss of the "potatoey" flavor. Also, don't keep potatoes in the light or they'll turn green and sprout. There's even some debate that the green is toxic if eaten in quantity. A greened potato is safe to eat after you cut out the color, but a once-toxic potato can't be at its best. Also, don't store onions and potatoes together; they exchange mutually detrimental gases that, besides smelling terrible, cause breakdown. They need separate but equal treatment.

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

Choose potatoes of a uniform size to ensure they cook in the same amount of time. Don't trim the potatoes to size. If you cut or peel potatoes before boiling, the unprotected potato will gain water weight that will later give you mush instead of mash.



Boil first, peel later.

A peeled potato absorbs too much water during boiling. Here, Everett uses a curved paring knife to remove the thin skin from a still-hot Yukon Gold.

When you have the perfect potato, boil it. Bring a pot of cold water to a boil. (Cold water takes longer to boil than hot, but since hot water comes from a holding tank, it can carry off flavors.) After the water is boiling, add about a tablespoon of salt for every quart. (Salted water boils more slowly.) This may seem like a lot of salt, but there's a difference in the flavor of potatoes cooked in salted water and plain potatoes salted after cooking. Finally, put scrubbed potatoes into the pot. Simmer the potatoes, uncovered, until a knife inserts easily, about 35 minutes. Drain the potatoes immediately; left to soak, they can become waterlogged.

None of my recipes is for "skins-on" mashed potatoes. Peeling the boiled potatoes is an optional step, because when you put a potato through a food mill, the potato is separated from its skin. However, you should peel your potatoes before mashing if you're making enormous quantities of potatoes (too many potato skins will clog the mill's mesh) or if you want a mashed potato free of even minuscule flecks of potato skin.

If you want perfectly "peel-less" potatoes, peel them when they're still almost too hot to handle; the potato's heat aids the peeling process. Hold the potato in one hand and, with a curved paring knife held at a 120° angle with the blade toward you, drag the knife over the potato's surface. The only time you might need to cut into the potato is on the first stroke. Yukon Golds have a very thin skin that comes off with a light touch; Idahoes, with their thicker skin, are a little tougher to deal with, and the potatoes tend to flake apart.

USE A FOOD MILL FOR MASHING

For me, there's only one potato-mashing tool: the food mill. It's nothing but an ancient food processor, but it's invaluable today. Essentially, it's a bowl with

a hand-turned blade that forces food through a perforated disk. You put the food in the bowl and crank the handle clockwise; the blade forces the food through the mesh.

Food mills are good for puréeing many foods, but they're ideal for making mashed potatoes. Food mills do more than mash the potatoes; when the potatoes are pushed through the mesh, the potato skins are removed and the potato flesh is "aerated," drying it further, fluffing it up, and helping it avoid a mushy future.

Food mills are made from metals like aluminum, tin, and stainless steel, and they range in price from \$35 to \$200. A good food mill should be made so that it's easy to clean—it shouldn't have a lot of nooks and crannies in which debris can be trapped. The largest cost factor is the mill's size and quality. Look for one that has a strong frame that comes with interchangeable disks in a variety of mesh sizes. Once you become acquainted with the food mill, you'll use it a lot, so don't settle for one that you feel won't live up to frequent bouts of work. A ricer is a decent (but by no means equal) substitute for a food mill. But never use a food processor to mash potatoes. The whirring blades will quickly produce a batch of extraordinarily gummy potatoes.

ENHANCING THE BASIC MASH

After your potatoes are mashed, move fast. Nothing is as unappealing as cold mashed potatoes, and since they don't take kindly to reheating (they become gummy and lose flavor), it's important to keep the mashed potatoes warm as you mix in the flavorings. You can do this by keeping the potatoes in a double boiler as you work, but it may be simpler to work very quickly, or to occasionally return the pan to the stove, or both.

Begin by stirring the potatoes vigorously as you add cold—not melted—butter. You want butter to add its richness, creaminess, and flavor, and melted butter adds only flavor in a stream of hot fat. Add butter in small amounts. Incorporate each butter portion before adding another; this is key to a finer, smoother mash.

In the interest of keeping the potatoes warm, heat the milk before you add it. And when you heat the milk, add seasonings such as sea salt, freshly

ground black pepper, and nutmeg. The milk's heat helps to break down the spices and to expand their flavors. Stir the potatoes constantly as you add the warm milk in a slow, steady stream.

The final step is another mashing, this time through the food mill's finest mesh. Some may see two mashings as excessive, but it definitely makes a difference. Try it before you dismiss it, unless you're dedicated to potatoes with lumps or don't care for silky mashed potatoes. If you want fresh herbs in your mashed potatoes, add them at the very last to preserve the herbs' aromatic properties and to ensure that they don't get mangled in the mashing, which would turn your potatoes green.

The mashed potato is pure and sublime in its unadulterated form, but there's plenty of room for enhancement. When considering variations, look at the potatoes' role in the meal. Is the mash complementing something full flavored, such as seared duck breast or a confit? You might use a little duck fat instead of butter for an intense, rich, and robust flavor. If you're serving potatoes with something lighter, like a paillard of veal, try enriching them with olive oil. If your childhood memories plead for it, flavor your potatoes with margarine. Substituting buttermilk or goat's milk for cow's creates a subtle but tangy finish.

Again, mashed potatoes are best when served immediately. If they must wait, keep the potatoes warm, uncovered, in a double boiler. Covering the potatoes creates condensation—more unwanted moisture.

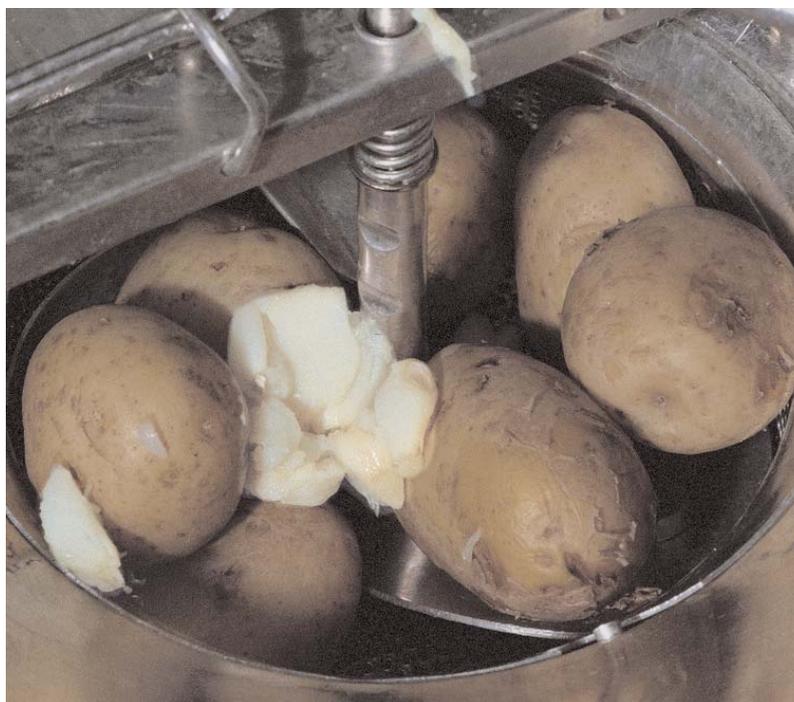
BASIC MASHED POTATOES

This is the mashed potato that can accompany meatloaf, fried chicken, or a fine steak. *Yields about 4 cups.*

2½ qt. cold water (approximately)
2 Tbs. sea salt
2 lb. medium Idaho or Yukon Gold potatoes, unpeeled, scrubbed
2 oz. (4 Tbs.) unsalted butter, chilled and cut into ½-Tbs. slices
½ cup hot milk
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
Nutmeg to taste

Bring the water to a boil; add the salt. Add the potatoes, reduce the heat to medium, and cook the potatoes until tender, about 35 min. Drain immediately.

If you want to peel the potatoes, do this as soon as they're cool enough to handle. (Most of the peel will be removed by the food mill, if you're using one.) Grind the



The food mill separates peel from potato. When the mill's blade is turned, the roasted garlic and skin-on potatoes are pushed through the fine mesh of the mill's disk, but the potato skin stays behind. The result is a smooth potato purée.

potatoes through a food mill using a fine mesh. Alternatively, peel the potatoes and put them through a ricer.

Keep the potatoes warm in a large double boiler as you add the butter; stir the potatoes constantly with a wooden spoon. Wait until each butter slice has been incorporated before adding more.

Slowly add the hot milk to the potatoes, stirring constantly. Grind the potatoes through the food mill again, this time using the finest mesh.

Season to taste with a pinch each of salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Keep the potatoes warm in a double boiler, uncovered, until served.

SUPER-RICH MASHED POTATOES

In addition to a good dose of butter and cream, Yukon Golds—with their naturally golden yellow color—make these mashed potatoes taste especially rich. *Yields about 5 cups.*

2½ qt. cold water (approximately)
2 Tbs. sea salt
2 lb. Yukon Gold potatoes, unpeeled, scrubbed
½ lb. (16 Tbs.) unsalted butter, chilled and cut into ½-Tbs. slices
¾ cup hot heavy cream
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Bring the water to a boil; add the salt. Add the potatoes, reduce the heat to medium, and cook the potatoes until tender, about 35 min. Drain immediately.

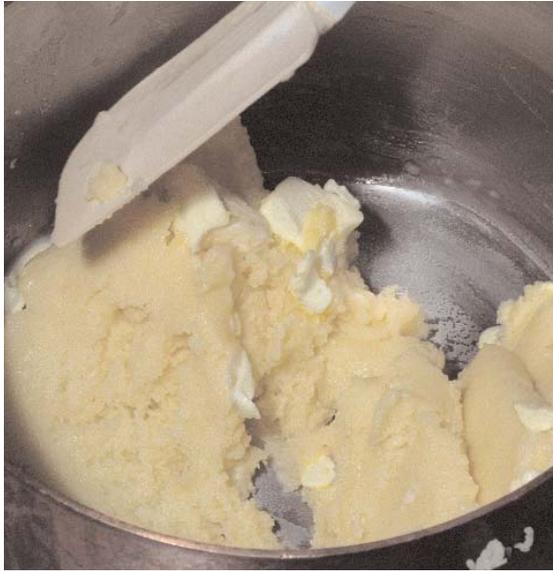
If you want to peel the potatoes, do this as soon as they're cool enough to handle. (Most of the peel will be removed by the food mill.) Grind the potatoes through a food mill using a fine mesh.

Keep the potatoes warm in a large double boiler as you add the butter; stir the potatoes constantly. Wait until each butter slice has been incorporated before adding more.

Slowly add the hot cream to the potatoes, stirring constantly. Grind the potatoes through the food mill again, this time using the finest mesh.

Season to taste with salt and pepper. Keep warm in a double boiler, uncovered, until served.

Stir hot potatoes quickly and add cold butter slowly for a smooth mash. After the potatoes are put through a food mill, mix in small pieces of cold butter. Each piece of butter should be nearly incorporated before adding another. If the potatoes get cold faster than you work, use a double boiler or occasionally return the pan to the stove.



Silky mashed potatoes are the result of milling twice. A second pass through the food mill's finest mesh creates perfectly smooth mashed potatoes.

ROASTED-GARLIC MASHED POTATOES

Roasted garlic tastes nutty and sweet, quite without the pungent edge of fresh garlic. Be sure to use a head with firm, moist cloves; if you have roasted garlic left over, don't throw it out. It tastes wonderful spread on toasted country bread. *Yields about 5 cups.*

3 Tbs. sea salt
1 whole head garlic
2 sprigs fresh thyme
2½ qt. cold water (approximately)
2 lb. Yukon Gold potatoes, unpeeled, scrubbed
1 oz. (2 Tbs.) unsalted butter, chilled and cut into ½-Tbs. slices
½ cup buttermilk
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Heat the oven to 350°F. Sprinkle 1 Tbs. of the sea salt on a small, ovenproof dish. Put the garlic head and thyme on the salt and cover with foil. Bake until the garlic is soft, about 45 min. Allow the garlic to cool slightly, then break the head into cloves and peel the garlic.

Bring the water to a boil and add the remaining sea salt. Add the potatoes, reduce the heat to medium, and cook the potatoes until they're tender, about 35 min. Drain immediately.

If you want to peel the potatoes, do this as soon as they're cool enough to handle. (Most of the peel will be removed by the food mill.) Grind the potatoes and half of the garlic cloves through a food mill.

Keep the potatoes warm in a large double boiler as you add the butter in thin slices; stir the potatoes constantly. Wait until each butter slice has been incorporated before adding more.

Warm the buttermilk (it may curdle slightly; this is not a problem). Slowly add the warm buttermilk to the potatoes, stirring constantly. Mix well. Season to taste with salt and pepper. If you want to add additional garlic, mash the cloves with a fork and add to taste.

Grind the potatoes through the food mill again, this time using the finest mesh. Keep warm in a double boiler, uncovered, until served.

LOW-FAT MASHED POTATOES

These butterless potatoes get their flavor from sautéed onions and fresh herbs. *Yields about 4½ cups.*

2½ qt. water (approximately)
1 Tbs. sea salt
2 lb. Idaho or Yukon Gold potatoes, unpeeled, scrubbed
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 small onion (about 2 oz.), sliced thin
½ cup hot skim milk
2 Tbs. mixed chopped chives, chervil, and parsley
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
Nutmeg to taste

Bring the water to a boil; add the salt. Add the potatoes, reduce the heat to medium, and cook until the potatoes are tender, about 35 min. Drain immediately.

If you want to peel the potatoes, do this as soon as they're cool enough to handle. (Most of the peel will be removed by the food mill.)

While the potatoes are cooking, heat the olive oil in a small sauté pan over low heat. Add the onion and sauté until translucent and soft, about 10 min.

Add the sautéed onion to the drained potatoes and grind the vegetables through a food mill using a fine mesh. Slowly add the hot milk to the potatoes, stirring constantly.

Grind the potatoes through the food mill again, this time using the finest mesh.

Add the herbs to the potatoes and season to taste with salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Keep warm in a double boiler, uncovered, until served.

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