

# One potato, two potato

by Lydia Lovell

No dinner, for the Lovell family, is quite complete without potato. Given a choice, Lovell menfolk would have hash-browns for breakfast every morning. Substitutes, like macaroni and cheese casserole, or rice with plenty of rich gravy, or even candied yams, are just that: substitutes. And in Aunt Olivia's day, women cooked to please the men.

She knew, even if they didn't (and didn't care), that potatoes were not only nutritious and versatile, but were economical and certain to satisfy. And because satisfying our appetites was Aunt Olivia's primary goal, every autumn she laid in a good supply of Maine potatoes. In her day, Idaho potatoes were unheard of on Cape Cod. Potato varieties that grew in gardens all over New England were Maines; no other kind was available.

In modern markets we find California whites, Idahos, russets, Prince Edward Island chef's, and Long Islanders. Even though we sometimes venture to try these foreigners, nothing beats an old-fashioned Maine potato. One reason we rely on them is they come in all different sizes. Big ones for baking, medium-sized for boiling, little ones for tucking in the roasting pan alongside a leg of lamb or rib of pork.

When Aunt Olivia decided to make potato salad, she began with six cups of hot cooked spuds, cut into large cubes. While the potatoes boiled, she mixed a dressing of ¼ C. cider vinegar, 2 T. water, ¾ C. olive oil, a crushed clove of garlic, 2 t. salt, ½ t. pepper, and 1 t. dried tarragon. The most difficult part was peeling the hot potatoes, but she was expert at the chore. Spearing a big fellow on her kitchen fork, she stripped the peel away with a paring knife, wasting not the smallest bit of tender meat.

Cubing went quickly on a cutting board. No sooner were all the potatoes cubed and scraped into a large bowl than she poured the dressing over them and stirred well. Next came one-half cup each, finely chopped onion, celery, and fresh parsley, and one medium cucumber, peeled and diced. After combining the vegetables, potatoes and dressing, Aunt Olivia filled lettuce cups with the mixture, arranged the salad on a platter, and wrapped platter-and-all in waxed paper before refrigerating. We use plastic wrap today.

Just before dinner, Aunt Olivia usually sprinkled the top with paprika, cut several ripe red tomatoes in quarters or sixths, and prepared a separate bowl of tomatoes and green pepper rings. Everyone helped himself.

We six potato-lovers would have been satisfied with baked spuds for dinner on a daily basis, but Aunt Olivia enjoyed variety not only at the table but in the preparation. Looking back, I have a hunch she invented new ways to prepare them to satisfy her own creative spirit. There could have been another reason, too. If there was anything she couldn't abide, it was waste. Often when a dab of this or a smidgeon of that was left over, Aunt Olivia would devise a new way to use it up.

Home fries offered endless opportunity for innovation.



After slicing up cold boiled potatoes, frying them in a heavy iron skillet, and draining them on a brown paper bag, she tossed into the spider whatever leftovers were available, sometimes adding a little water to loosen cooked-on bits of potato. The result was gravy that took only a few minutes to prepare. A diced half-onion; a green pepper or any other vegetable, chopped; a slice or two of bacon; whatever seemed compatible and in any combination went into those gravies. She called them "O'Brien Sauce."

**Potato Surprise** may have been Aunt Olivia's own invention; her house was the only place I ever ate it. Using a medium to large potato per person, she baked them at 350° for 45 minutes, then removed them from the oven. With an apple corer in one hand, and a thick pot holder in the other, she made a tubular opening on one end to remove a core of potato. Into the hole she tucked a tightly rolled thin strip of lean raw bacon. Then she replaced the plug and returned the potatoes to the oven for another half-hour. Neither butter nor gravy was served with Potato Surprise; neither was needed.

Mashed potato comes in astonishingly wide variations of quality. Properly prepared, nothing is finer. Improperly pre-

pared, mashed potato is fit only for feeding pigs. Aunt Olivia's? Superb.

After peeling one large potato per person, she cut them in quarters, boiled them for 25 or 30 minutes until tender, and drained them (reserving the cooking water for soup or gravy). Then she allowed them to dry a few minutes in the pan until all excess water had evaporated. While she mashed them with a wooden mallet (I use an electric beater), a cup of rich creamy milk was heating on the stove. When the potatoes were lump-free and the milk scalded but not boiling, she poured in just enough milk to produce a consistency like whipped heavy cream. Aunt Olivia used a large whisk (again, I use the beater), to beat in air. Half a stick of butter or oleo, a teaspoon of salt, and ¼ t. pepper were the final touches. The result, served in a warmed bowl, with plenty of brown gravy, guarantees nothing will be left for the pigs.

When Lovells sat down to a fish dinner, they were reasonably sure potatoes would be dressed with lemon butter. Aunt Olivia used small whole new potatoes and scrubbed the skins off with a stiff vegetable brush. For six of us she boiled a dozen to 15 in an inch of salted water for 20 minutes. While the fish was baking and the 'taters boiling, she prepared the sauce, melting 4 T. butter and adding a teaspoon grated lemon peel, 2 T. lemon juice, 1 T. snipped chives, ½ t. salt, 1/8 t. pepper, and a tiny pinch of nutmeg. Heating the mixture just to the boiling point took only a minute.

When the fish was ready and the potatoes tender, Aunt Olivia placed a few potatoes on each plate, drizzled them with lemon butter, put a generous portion of fish alongside and garnished with watercress or parsley. In season, the Lovells' favorite vegetable with this dinner was corn-on-the-cob, but carrots or summer squash and a tossed green salad met with good reception, too.

In wintry weather, try **Cheese-Potato Casserole** with baked ham or roast pork. Put 3 cups raw potatoes, large ones, cut as for French fries, and one medium sliced raw onion (optional), in a greased baking dish. Pour ½ cup milk over them. Dot with butter and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Cover and bake at 425° for 40 minutes. Sprinkle on ½ cup shredded processed cheese and 1 T. finely cut parsley. Cover and return to oven for 5 or 10 minutes more. Serves four and is even better reheated. I always double this recipe to ensure a second helping the next day.

Baked potatoes . . . nothing simpler . . . need only an hour in a hot oven. Plan one medium potato per serving. Scrub well and nip off a thin slice at each end to prevent bursting. Nothing better. But Aunt Olivia, for a break in routine, experimented and innovated.