

Behold, the Lowly Potato

by Lydia Lovell

From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Some years good potatoes for baking are hard to find in local markets. This is one such year. One man, who raises a few acres of spuds for family use and who had some to share as well, reminded me there had been midsummer floods this year in mid-Atlantic farm-country. "We'll have to wait to see how the potato crop comes in from Maine," he said. Yes, and from Prince Edward Island, too. High-priced potatoes, if supplies are scarce, can be expected.

Buying potatoes in quantity can help compensate for price increases; ten-pound bags are often only pennies more costly than five-pound packages. Keeping-qualities are a consideration, of course, but even if you are cooking for only two, Aunt Olivia taught me how a ten-pound bag of potatoes can present real opportunity for saving.

She'd watch for fresh deliveries of bagged Maine potatoes, then choose a ten-pounder containing a range of sizes. As soon as we got them home, she opened the bag, separated all those medium-sized ones best-suited for baking from the overly-large and the little ones. Medium-sized ones in good condition, Aunt Olivia spread out in a single layer on an airy shady shelf where they would dry quickly. Usually they amounted to about half the quantity of potatoes she'd brought home.

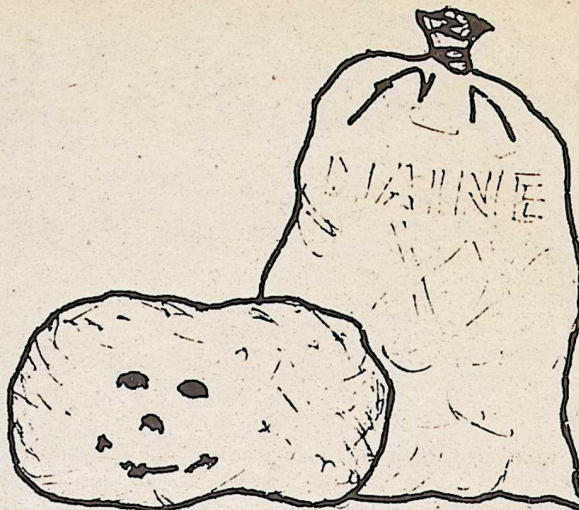
The remainder... big, small, and misshapen ones... those with cuts, bruises, or blemishes, we scrubbed clean, peeled, cut to uniform size, and put on to boil in a big pot of water. We never measured exactly; we didn't weigh them. We boiled up about five pounds... give or take.

After cooking 25 or 30 minutes, the potatoes were fork-tender. We drained them in a colander, then returned them to the cooking pot for mashing. Today I use an electric beater, but Aunt Olivia always called on Uncle Henry because he used a wooden mallet for **Mashed Potato Casserole**. While he wielded the masher, Aunt Olivia beat together the following ingredients:

1 C. sour cream	2 t. finely minced onion
1 8-oz. pkg. cream cheese	1-1/2 t. salt
softened to room temperature	1/2 t. black pepper
2T. butter	1/4 C. Parmesan cheese, grated

While continuing to beat the potatoes, add the cream cheese mixture and mix until light and fluffy. Pack potatoes into four or five plastic pint-sized containers with covers. Refrigerate until ready to use within two weeks, or freeze to use within three months. To re-heat, empty into a well-greased casserole, dot surface with butter, and bake, covered, at 350° for 30 minutes. Top with Parmesan cheese, if desired, and remove cover for last ten minutes to brown top.

Mashed Potato Casserole was Uncle Henry's favorite potato dish and Aunt Olivia favored it, too, because with a bowlful on hand in her icebox, she was always ready to make a festive meal for short-notice entertaining. And economical-



Once the potatoes airing on the shelf were thoroughly dry, Aunt Olivia stored them in a dark, dry cupboard to be used exclusively for baking. She knew if she put them away with any dampness still on the skins, rot would spoil them.

Second to Mashed Potato Casserole, Uncle Henry's choice was plain old-fashioned baked spuds, dressed with sweet butter and salt-and-peppered to his liking at the table. Or at least that's what he said as he split one open and dropped a thick pat of butter on top to melt. Then again, whenever Aunt Olivia made **Scalloped Potatoes**, Uncle Henry spooned a generous portion onto his own plate after serving everyone else, never failing to tell his beaming wife that this was his second-favorite potato dish!!

6 large potatoes	1 t. salt
1 large turnip	1/2 t. pepper
1 medium onion	2/3 C. milk butter

Peel potatoes, turnip, and onion. Slice potatoes thin. Cut

turnip into 1" cubes. Dice onion. Beginning with potato, layer vegetables in a large well-greased baking dish or casserole, spreading turnip cubes over potatoes and scattering onions over turnips, ending with a potato layer. Salt and pepper both layers of potatoes. Pour milk slowly over vegetables to within an inch of the top. Tuck a lump of butter the size of a walnut in the center, cover, and bake 30 minutes in a 350° oven. Remove cover and test with fork. Vegetables should be almost tender. Return, uncovered, to oven, turn off heat, and bake 15 minutes more. Yield: six to eight servings. Good reheated, too.

Uncle Henry had so many "second best" choices, when it came to potatoes, Aunt Olivia never worried about whether he'd find her offerings satisfactory. Potatoes, she concluded, however prepared, were Henry's favorite vegetable. She knew he liked them best mashed, but whenever she fixed them a different way, he liked them almost as well. Sometimes she made a pudding or **Potato Kugel**, as her friend Rebecca had taught her.

1 large minced onion	1/3 C. flour
1/4 C. chicken fat, melted	1/2 t. baking powder
3 well-beaten eggs	1-1/2 t. salt
3 C. grated raw potatoes (measured after draining well)	black pepper, fresh-ground

In a small frying pan, saute onion in chicken fat until golden. Beat eggs in large bowl; stir in drained raw grated potatoes and sift dry ingredients into mixture. After stirring, combine with sauteed onions and fat. Pour mixture into well-greased one-quart casserole and bake, uncovered, at 400° for about an hour until edges are crisp. Serves six.

Grating potatoes before there were blenders and food processors was an arduous task, but with modern kitchen appliances, grating becomes a button-pushing activity rather than a knuckle-nicking one.

While Potato Kugel is an excellent casserole dish, **Potato Pancakes** are a treat to serve at an intimate little dinner for "just the two of you."

2 C. grated raw potatoes measured after draining well	1 heaping T. flour 1/4 t. baking powder
2 well-beaten eggs	1 small onion, grated
1 t. salt	

Combine all ingredients. Mix well. Drop by tablespoons into a well-oiled hot skillet and flatten with the back of the spoon to about 2-1/2 inches in diameter. When golden, flip to cook other side. Serve hot with a choice of applesauce or sour cream to accompany pot roast or meat loaf. Make enough for two hungry people who are mighty fond of potato pancakes. Double the recipe if you expect to feed six. Leftover pancakes can be wrapped in foil, refrigerated, and reheated in the oven for breakfast.

Like bread, the potato is a staple food. And it is good.