

## *Doing the Mashed Potato*

Mashed potatoes have been enjoying a comeback in haute-cuisine circles lately, ever since Joël Robuchon mixed his with half again as much butter and slipped them onto his menu as the house *pommes purées*. (The French drop the *de terre* from *pommes de terre* as they drop the *à la* of *boeuf à la mode* to name their classic dish *boeuf mode*.) The subtle point about Robuchon's offering is that his mashed potatoes are sublime and need no ornate name. But then his lamb chops are sublime, too. Robuchon's food is sublime and he lists it simply with no pretension — just the very finest quality ingredients and best execution possible from a talented-but-modest chef and his brigade.

This simplicity belies the effort and skill necessary to create really good mashed potatoes. They just don't happen any which way but require choosing the right kind of potato, storing it properly, cooking it properly at the right temperature and for the right amount of time and reducing the mealy pulp to a silky purée using the right tools (there are some very wrong ones).

Mashed potatoes once were standard fare, both in homes and in restaurants. They weren't necessarily Joël Robuchon's formula, but then we don't all need to get our potatoes mashed with that much butter (several times the daily recommended grams of fat). Those mashed potatoes were made honestly by boiling or simmering potatoes until tender, peeling them before or after (depending on the family's or the chef's tradition and beliefs), and thinning the result with milk or cream and butter (if you are American) or some reserved potato water or cream and perhaps butter if you come from somewhere else.

That was all before giant food companies began to put out "instant mashed potatoes". The first ones I ever saw were useful, my mother thought, for packing on hiking trips into the woods, just like packets of dried French onion soup, which appeared at about the same time and later found fame in an infamous marriage with sour cream as a dip served at parties by lazy hosts. You added boiling water and got something that looked like mashed potatoes, felt like mashed potatoes on the tongue (sort of), and carried an aftertaste that was anything but potato — a curious chemical quality that just tasted "different". Every instant dried mashed potato product I've tasted since then has had this curious aftertaste, which always prompts me to ask myself what else the cook is using that is "instant". A now-retired chef in our city once served a Vichyssoise that had that instant-potato aftertaste, a sad commentary on his attitude toward his customers. I'd been his customer long enough to know that technically he knew how to make fine mashed potatoes and to combine them with puréed leeks, then

enrich them with cream and chill them for this wonderful soup created by Louis Diat from memories of soup at his *maman's* table. Apparently, he just liked the short cut.

Recently I had an evening meal in the dining room of a small motel on the west coast of Florida where I was staying. I had not been my intention to dine there, but I had been traveling all day, I was exhausted, and the fabulous fish restaurant on the beach was jumping on that Thursday night in the high season. The hostess's offer to let me sip cocktails on the veranda for an hour and a half while they found a table was hardly attractive, so I headed back to the humble offerings of my hostelry. What I found was a small menu that said "real home-made mashed potatoes". Here was somebody after my own heart, an honest cook offering honest cooking without pretense. The menu also offered stuffed peppers, stuffed cabbage, and lemon-grilled chicken — nothing fancy, no fancy nappery either, and no liquor license — just really finely mashed potatoes and really good simple food. I ordered the lemon chicken and the mashed potatoes, which arrived with an honest chicken gravy that had never seen a stock base or the inside of a can.

The mashed potatoes were "home style". They had a few bits of not-too finely mashed potato and they were so much more comforting than "curly fries" or a gummy, metallic-flavored baked potato wrapped in foil that seem to be the rule in chain-motel restaurants. I savored every mouthful of the generous helping.

Mashed potatoes can be achieved using several different methods. Some of us have been experimenting with them for years, trying different potato varieties, peeling and not peeling before cooking, cooking whole or quartering or cubing, boiling or simmering, mashing or putting through a potato ricer.

One of my colleagues, Jeffrey Steingarten, wrote a superb article on his quest for the best mashed potatoes in *House and Garden* some years ago. It was reprinted in Steingarten's book *The Man Who Ate Everything*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1998. Steingarten, after a number of experiments, concluded that the potato should be an Idaho type. (Other potatoes work, certainly those Maine all-purpose ones that never make as far west as where I live.) He also decided that the potato must be cooked at a low temperature, simmered gently, to avoid gumminess. I'd already come to that conclusion before I read his essay. Robuchon claims that he uses a potato variety called a BF-15, which is grown on French soil, but rumor has it that some French chefs have Idahos shipped in to them from the States, just for making mashed potatoes. Steingarten's article is

fairly lengthy. It pops a lot of potato myths and verifies some others, but it's clear that Jeffery Steingarten, like a few American and French chefs, takes mashed potatoes seriously. You can too. Here's how:

Choose a large enough pan to hold whatever quantity of potatoes you plan to cook plus 1/2 inch water to cover. I usually use a pan with a high-quality stainless steel lining, like those made by All Clad.

To peel or not to peel? There are lots of old wives' (and old chefs') tales and arguments can be made on both sides. I don't think it makes much difference, except that the idea that the skin protects the potato from becoming soggy is hooey unless you allow peeled, cooked potatoes to sit in water afterward. You'll lose less potato if you peel after cooking. What you want is pulp that is going to be diluted with some liquid anyway. Besides, you are going to adjust the consistency by cooking the final result over heat to evaporate some moisture, so you can control the wetness factor. I think that potato skins give potatoes to be mashed an "off" taste, so I peel first.

To cook whole or cut? As Steingarten suggests, the potatoes need to cook in as short a time as possible at as low a temperature as possible to avoid gumminess. My choice is cut them into 2-inch cubes.

Put the potatoes in cold water to cover by half an inch. Add salt, and bring to a boil. Immediately reduce the heat to a simmer. Check after about 10 minutes by piercing a piece of potato in the pot with the point of a sharp knife. When the potatoes are tender, drain them, saving a little of the potato water for a low-calorie thinner. If you want, set the potatoes back on the heat briefly to dry them a little, then put them through a potato ricer. If you don't have one of these devices, search until you find one; they make much superior mashed potatoes to the standard "mashers". Steingarten swears they contribute to fluffy, tender mashed potatoes by not brutalizing the pulp as you might with the masher or a food mill. *Never* use a food processor. The pulp turns to glue!

I came by my ricer in the early days of our household when my husband and I were equipping our kitchen. I had to have one of these, he insisted. I had never seen one before, so one afternoon he arrived with it tucked under his arm. He was right, the ricer does a wonderful job pulverizing potato pulp. And it forces the pulp through holes just once. The pulp is not forced round and round as it is with a food mill, or repeatedly bashed, as it is with the "masher". Get one; you'll love it!

Now comes the butter-first school versus the milk-first school. The truth it, is doesn't make a bit of difference. If you are using butter, use unsalted butter (it will be fresher), and if you're counting fat grams, put the butter in first, neatly measured and melted (a microwave oven does this neatly). You may also leave the butter out and adjust the consistency with only potato water or skimmed milk.

Some cooking harpies insist that the butter must be melted and the milk boiling. If you are using true butter, be sure to melt it. Otherwise, it takes too long to melt once it is added to the potato mixture. If you are using a soft margarine, it melts quickly. Just plop it in. Hot milk will keep the potatoes warmer and you won't have to gently reheat the potato mixture. The amount of moisture always varies in mashed potatoes, so adding liquid gradually assures that you get what you want, not soup by mistake. Beat each addition in with the wooden spoon or wooden spatula.

Taste the potatoes for seasonings. There may have been enough salt in the cooking water, but maybe not. Add fine sea salt if needed and freshly ground white pepper to your taste and, as M.F.K. Fisher said, "send it forth".

Make sure your potatoes are hot when they go to the table. Put them in a heated bowl or on heated plates. If they are not hot, heat them slowly. Do it in a double boiler if you're feeling wimpy, but the best way is to just stir them over medium-low heat.

For a more refined approach (I only do this for persons I love very much), before the final heating the force the potato mixture through a drum sieve (a *tamis*) using a plastic baker's scraper (also called a bench knife). The resulting purée is silky smooth and very special indeed.

*Madge Griswold*