

Potatoes

Sustaining Staple or Gourmet Gem?

Or both, perhaps. In an episode of The Food Programme timed to coincide with last year's London Potato Fair, a somewhat heated argument suddenly broke out between the three principal participants, John Reader, author of *The Untold History of the Potato*; Alan Wilson, Technical Manager for Agronomy for Waitrose (and a renowned potato expert) and Anthony Carroll, award-winning owner of Carroll's Heritage potatoes. All three had been extolling the joys and virtues of the not-so-humble tuber, when Reader voiced a fierce objection to the 'upmarket push' and 'titivation' afforded by niche market heritage varieties – to him an unwanted distraction from a recognition of the widely affordable, readily growable, high yielding 'nutritional powerhouse' represented by the principal commercial UK varieties.

Certainly food historians have generally focused on the saving grace of the potato for many an otherwise grain-dependent North European peasant economy from the 17th century onwards – it proved so for my parents' country, Latvia, and the Baltics generally – though over-reliance could lead to disaster when blight ravaged the crop, as has happened in the Highlands as well as Ireland. Acclaimed food writers from Jane Grigson to Rose Prince, meanwhile, have bewailed the loss or at least wide availability of the less usual, generally highly characterful, varieties. 'This country has produced many fine varieties of potato, all suited to different methods of cooking. We have the climate and skill for raising potatoes' wrote Jane Grigson in her seminal *Vegetable Book* in 1978. 'Yet', she continued, 'greengrocers and farmers have managed to reduce this treasure of the Incas...to three or four varieties whose only virtue is yield'. Some thirty years later, Rose Prince averred in *The Savvy Shopper* that 'this is an area of horticulture where the lack of diversity is virtually criminal'. In *The New English Table* (2008) she expands on the linked environmental problems, and how monoculture encourages heavy 'blanket' chemical spraying. She does also admit, however, that '...the world of potatoes is becoming more interesting again, with farms growing traditional or new breeds'. Both writers of course give recipes that would be perfectly delicious produced with, say, the maincrop King Edward, the Cox's Orange pippin of the potato world. It was, in fact, my family's favourite – deprived as they were of their beloved native varieties – in post-war Lancashire. It's only some half a century later, in London, that I've sampled the famous Lancashire variety of 'Fortyfold' – thanks to Alan Wilson, and Waitrose.

The Dairy Connection

'Is it potatoes we love, or the fat they are inevitably cooked with?' asks a slightly irritated Prince. To which I might respond: if it takes butter to transform a staple spud from grub to gourmet, is that such a bad thing in a country that excels in the quality of its dairy produce? Pre-war Latvia, too, was renowned for the quality of its

milk, cream and butter, thanks to the native breed of cow that produced particularly rich milk, grazing on extensive, lush pasture. Perhaps the passion for potatoes evidenced by my mother's family – dairy farmers, in a mixed farm context, for generations – owed more than a little to this essential adjunct. Prince, of course, is referring more than glancingly to chip oil as well as butter (or indeed dripping). A Lancashire childhood would have been strange indeed without a weekly trip to the chippie and I recall the ritual reasonably fondly; but the bond I formed through twice-daily exposure was for potatoes 'proper', carted back by the sackful from Bolton market hall by my grandfather, and boiled (mostly), mashed, creamed, baked, chopped into soups and, joy of joys, formed into buttery, crusty pancakes. I spoke not a word of English before going to school, so I still translate the names of the dishes in my mind. Mostly I recall the endless discussions – not a mealtime passed without debating the quality of the potato on the plate. And there was invariably potato, in some form, on the plate. Quite often, for me at least, it was the main event. For many years, though urbanites, we did not have a fridge (nor a TV to put fancy ideas in my head); so when feeling peckish I would dive into the larder and lift from the perma-bowl of cold, boiled potatoes. These would be dipped into a little salt and accompanied by rugušpiens (soured, or 'clabbered' milk) either as a drink or a dressing, like yoghurt, depending on the thickness of the curds. The aim was to have both styles available, as would have been the case in Latvia, but of course fermentation conditions were variable so it didn't always work out, to my chagrin, as I much preferred the thick curds. There again, being an only child, I was generally allowed to scrape off the soured cream under the top skin (the milk was 'green top' of course). That was particularly good with hot potatoes.

Gourmet Fare

By common reckoning, this would be considered peasant subsistence – or at any rate refugee-urbanite – cuisine. For me, though, the daily potatoes were every bit as wonderful as pan-fried river-fresh perch, butter-baked pike, home-smoked eel from the lakes, eggs from the back-yard hens, my grandfather's barrel-fermented sauerkraut, wild mushroom soured cream sauces, cinnamon baked apples and sweet cardamom-scented yeast breads. Many of these might be considered 'gourmet' fare by common consent. The term 'heritage' variety (now understood to mean pre-1950 in the potato world, though quite a number date back to the turn of the century) would not have been coined, and the only name I recall is King Edward. Sources were principally Cheshire, Lincolnshire – and Cyprus. Poor potatoes caused much lament and furious (foreign!) words with the unfortunate stall holder. None, however, would have been freshly pulled from the earth, though they certainly didn't reach market washed, scrubbed and plastic-wrapped. My experience of freshly dug potatoes is all too rare, though we've played around with new potatoes grown in a bucket. Nonetheless I wouldn't dream of arguing with Alan Wilson's definition of a taste sensation as a June-grown Duke of York freshly dug, rushed to the pot and served up within 25 minutes. I do now seek out varieties such as Shetland Black, Arran Victory, Fortyfold, Highland Burgundy Red, Mr Little's Yeltholm Gypsy (how could anyone resist?!), all of which I've enjoyed in the last

month or two thanks largely to the more enlightened supermarkets, though also occasionally local market stalls. Simply boiled, with a little crème fraîche (no home-fermented milk nowadays) it's a food that could not be bettered, not even by the finest caviar. The same can be said of fine Jersey Royals and Cornish new potatoes with a pat of truly fresh butter.

But it would be equally inept to argue with John Reader's perception that this remains at present a relatively rare indulgence. The 'non-commercial' varieties are on the whole pesky individuals, labour intensive to cultivate and harvest, challenging to mass distribution channels. They have a role, or several – the seed bank alone may prove invaluable in meeting the challenge of changing climate conditions. I hope there will always be space not only for specialising farmers but budding small-plot gardeners to grow such; long may potato fairs thrive!

The Great Sustainer

Back, however, to Reader's championing of the potato as a sustaining and sustainable powerhouse of nutrition, four times more productive than grain per land area and unit of labour. He has even calculated that a potato-patch one quarter the size of Wembley stadium, with a cow added to the mix (!) could keep a family of four perfectly adequately fed for a year, with a little left to trade or barter. I am neither an agronomist nor a statistician, but imagine this could be a rather optimism-inducing statistic in the light of our urgent need to establish UK food-security, with a small surplus of efficiently home-grown foods to trade for non-native fruits, spices and commodities. My paltry London suburban patch, like so many others, would be but a small blob in Wembley stadium, but if we could allocate farming land sensibly throughout Britain, and grow a suitable range of potato varieties as best suits the soil and climate of each field – all in the context of plenty of mixed farm smallholdings – then here might be a major key to feeding ourselves nutritionally well in the future.

The Star Performer?

How well gastronomically is something I feel more confident in detailing. Let's assume we are dealing with a few decent, widely available varieties, which might not, simply boiled, constitute a gourmet experience in themselves, even when adorned with a pat of good butter. In fact, most of us would not consider such a dish a meal in itself, let alone a gastronomically exciting meal. Unless the need truly strikes, we would not attempt to live off potatoes, a little dairy, and little else. That is not to say that the addition of a little this, that and the other – from meat to other vegetables, pulses, nuts, sauces and seasonings – might not transform the potato dish into a delightful meal. The problem is that we have grown used to casting potatoes somewhat aside, rather literally. Boiled, mashed, chipped, or even in quite richly sauced gratin form, they are a 'side' in modern ready meal parlance.

Perhaps it's a symbol of affluence, akin to the relegation of bread, however well crafted and delicious in itself. Back in 1970, Margaret Costa in her much lauded but now rarely mentioned *Four Seasons Cookery Book* (the cooking bible of my youth) already had a bit of a struggle persuading readers to consider potatoes a main event. Describing the Colcannon of her childhood, she notes 'The Irish knew best how to eat potatoes – and cabbage. It's the cuisine of the poor but it's not without subtlety.' And of champ: 'simply potatoes as cooked for colcannon – it's the way you eat it that makes it the great delicacy it is'. That well of melted butter certainly resonates with my memories of simple mash served the same way. Costa's recipes for 'exquisite' freshly dug Spring new potatoes are simple and glorious. Scalloped New Potatoes involves parboiling and slicing them, then layering with mushrooms and a cheese sauce to produce a decidedly British 'gratin'. No mention of this serving as an accompaniment to meat or fish. By contrast, in Sarah Freeman's classic *Modern British Cookery*, first published nearly thirty years later, a terrific recipe for Gabriel Potatoes (another 'British' gratin, though the cheese of the title is Irish – here the sliced potatoes are cleverly par-boiled, or rather par-baked in the oven until the water evaporates, thus saving another pot from the washing up bowl) is described as 'adding interest to a plain item such as baked or grilled non-oily fish, roast chicken, or a pork chop'. And yet we hardly need the extra protein, or its contribution to flavour.

Nonetheless, it's probably in the context of a 'gratin' that we most readily imagine a potato dish taking centre stage. The name comes of course from the French baking dish, and many of our most popular recipes are also French in origin, with occasional changes in nomenclature such as *Boulangère*, generally indicating a departure from the classic cream based cooking medium. Oddly, we seem generally to stick with the classic models, even though a delve into French regional cookery would come up with a wealth of variations. No need to use cream, nor even a béchamel or thickened white sauce; stock (of almost any description) can contribute more flavour, if less unctuousness. A dab of butter can compensate for the latter. The stock might simply be the liquid from reconstituting wild mushrooms; or the leftover juices from a roast, with shreds of leftover meat added perhaps. Or you might use tomato juice or a simple soup as a layering agent. A little ham hock or gammon or bacon would add protein and flavour. The potatoes can be layered with lentils, and of course with other vegetables, either thinly sliced root or well-drained greens. I layered thinly sliced potatoes with equally thinly sliced kohlrabi dusted with dried porcini powder (home made, as it happens, though it's available to buy and goes a long way treated somewhat as a spice) along with a little chicken stock for a cookery competition once upon a time. This was mandolin-shaved wafer-thin stuff, so the layers magically 'melded' – but it needn't be. If you want your greens to remain reasonably vibrant, parboil the potatoes before layering – you're likely to preserve more vitamin C within the potato that way, too.

I won't give a recipe here because you can look one up almost anywhere, not least the web. It's then a matter of confidently forging ahead with whatever ingredients come to hand. Much the same applies to potato cakes or potato-based 'cakes' such as salmon fish cakes. Try one or two well attested recipe variants first, then it's

simply a matter of packing together mashed potatoes, egg or other binding, and your chosen 'add in' protein and herb or spice, so they don't fall apart in cooking. Chilling the mixture generally helps with the handling. Just a little experience and you can vary ad infinitum.

A word about Jansson's Temptation

Just occasionally, it's worth following an original recipe to the letter, not least if it sounds a little strange. Please, please use the right ingredients and technique for Janssons Frestelse. The potatoes need not be Swedish, but the ansjovis – spiced, fermented sprats and not salted or canned anchovies – do. Take it from someone brought up with this unique product (you can buy Abbas ansjovis from IKEA – link below – as well as Scandinavian food shops in the UK). There again, I know plenty of people who love potato gratin flavoured with Mediterranean anchovies. So maybe ignore what I just said. Do, however, add some salad to your potato bakes and cakes and forget, for much of the time, the idea of a hunk of flesh, fish or fowl as centrepiece.

Gourmet Canvas

Of course there are sound historical precedents for the British love of a mite more meat or fish in relation to potato, the hallowed roast aside. Browse through any book of traditional recipes and you'll encounter a wealth of potato-topped hotpots, Shepherd's and Cottage 'Pies' and of course Fish Pies. Whether you want to be authentic or innovative, there are again plenty of recipes you can look up. What interests me in this context is that the potato is a topping, 'hiding' the more savoury ingredients; often – though not invariably – the latter are rather pale and wan in appearance (even if perfectly flavourful), rather than richly coloured with, say, wine reductions, tomato sauces, saffron and other spices. This lends credence to the claims of those who say that in contrast to cuisines based on rice or pasta, potato based dishes could never aspire to either great diversity or culinary excellence. In other words, if the UK were suddenly to have to rely on potato as a mainstay, rather than imported rice or pasta (the latter can be UK made, and theoretically from British wheat, but I've never found is as good as the bronze-die extruded Italian artisan versions) we would have to lower our gastronomic sights. I wonder. I frequently knock up a 'Bolognese' style sauce, with Italian passata (but we could theoretically produce our own) and wine (ditto) but otherwise British products, and then alternate between pasta and mash as the starchy mainstay. So 'spag bol' is not considered a gourmet experience any more than is Cottage Pie. But a great ragù is. Maybe we need to adjust our preconceptions rather than our aspirations, along with our ingredients and, occasionally, techniques.

There are more examples of 'interchangeable starching' I could cite. But I'm sure you can work them out for yourself. Of course potatoes in whatever form are a different texture from rice or pasta – the latter in particular seems endlessly versatile shape wise, even if we stay with a very few basic shapes in the UK. And

both retain their basic shape throughout cooking and saucing. But it's not hard to argue that the potato is actually considerably more versatile than either, as well as more nutritious and flavourful (depending, as ever, on treatment). I strongly suspect that we could create a potato base to suit just about every sauce ever imposed on rice or pasta.

A final recipe

Anyhow, for fun, and just to soften the edges of all such argument, here is an account and recipe for perfected 'gnocchi'. We could give them a British name. Latvians had something similar (though not one of my family's staples) called, in translation, 'bullets'. Here we use British potatoes, British sea salt, British eggs for the egg-enriched version, and a little soft flour which may as well be British too. This would suit fine a scenario where we major on potatoes, grow a little wheat, and keep free-ranging chickens widely. And as we know, 'gnocchi' can take quite a variety of those wonderful Italianate sauces we've grown used to. As well as simply a little butter, and/or cheese, perhaps a scattering of herbs, or wilted spinach. A mere sprinkle of crisp bacon adds texture, but fried breadcrumbs would do just fine. The other, really important, British aspect is that, in contradistinction to the dire warnings of Italian cookery writers, it's actually terribly easy and simple to produce them. Believe me; I tried endless variations when I undertook the challenge. You won't need to, and you don't even need to read the background notes, though you could just for fun...

POTATO GNOCCHI THE BRITISH WAY

So, why roll your own when you can buy them in dinky packets, various sizes and sometimes tricolour too? Well, in contradistinction to pasta, taste and texture of the home made version will prove far superior. It will of course cost less. It's more fun (honestly!) And it's only very slightly messier. Unless your children want to help. But then it's even more fun...

First, the allegedly tricky challenge. According to Anna del Conte (whom I respect in every way): 'You have to know the right potatoes to use, to add just enough flour to hold the gnocchi together but not to make them heavy, and to boil them on the right heat, just enough for the flour to cook'. She describes graphically the dangers of disintegration, or 'a gluey mess'. The great Marcella Hazan goes to great lengths to suggest ways of preventing gnocchi collapse, and insists on split second timing at the boiling stage. Gulp.

Rest reassured: my first attempt, with a non-recommended potato and far less flour than considered 'safe' met with complete, unexpected success. And it was no fluke, though I encountered minor disappointments in the course of experiment. I grew lackadaisical, yet never once did my gnocchi dissolve into particles, or produce wallpaper paste. The final formula I could prepare in my sleep.

The potato. Yes, it's all about the potato and little else (as little else as possible). Forget the bouncy, flavour-free commercial item (OK, some are better than that) and see the process as aiming to present mash in dumpling form. So you want a potato that will produce decent mash and taste good. You can find lists of ideal mashing potatoes on the web (see below). I tried mainstream varieties on principle, but have just experimented, successfully, with Shetland Black.

In essence: Maris Piper actually had a decent potato flavour, but was slightly sweet. Estima was similar, and the samples I tried had a musty note. Sante were somewhat boring and produced a crumbly mixture. Romano didn't taste at all bad but were a bit gluey. Near-cousin Desirée fared better with a positive potato flavour and creamy texture. The best flavour came from an organic Cara; but King Edwards proved consistently good and gave a light texture. By all means experiment with heritage varieties (the photos are from the Shetland Black session) but King Edwards will do nicely.

The flour. Everyone agrees on the one hard and fast rule: the less flour, the lighter the gnocchi. Del Conte points out that in Piedmont, the best gnocchi makers add only 100g flour to 1Kg of potatoes. I actually managed less than that, but after many variables am suggesting a little more in the recipe as a safety margin.

It's equally important that the flour 'cooks out' in about 2½ minutes. Think of your white sauces and you'll realise that strong or even 'plain' flour, organic or no, is out. I tested it anyway, and found that the gnocchi prepared with a good organic plain flour tasted unbearably floury and potato was hard to discern. That's not to say you won't find an apt one; I'll keep trying. In the end I used traditional, soft Italian '00' flour, though the lightest results came from a French patisserie flour described as 'free-flowing'. You can find commercial flours that are labelled as soft (McDougalls even label theirs as '00'). Britain excels in soft, flavourful flours, but they are generally blended for bread making. See what you can find.

The eggs. Pasta expert Julia della Croce avers that 'Egg gives gnocchi an unappealing bouncy quality'. Anna Del Conte is more diplomatic: 'gnocchi with eggs have more 'spirit' and more body' (but she prefers them without). I tried for myself. Whole egg samples proved too rubbery, partly due to the need for considerably more flour to bind the mixture. Egg yolk mixtures do have their attractions, not least a golden colour, particularly if using Legbar eggs. And the resultant gnocchi can take more 'robust' saucing. Once again, King Edward potatoes proved the best medium.

Seasoning. Salt, in rather generous quantity, is crucial at all stages: boiling the potatoes, forming the dough, simmering the gnocchi. Any less than I've indicated produces a disconcertingly sweet result. You can of course add pepper, nutmeg and even fresh herbs (but a small amount, to avoid overmuch moisture) to counteract this somewhat.

Cooking the potatoes. Opinions on this are fierce and varied from boiling (skin-on), to baking, to embracing the microwave. I found that given the size of maincrop

potatoes, boiling uncut, skin-on spuds took an infuriation 30–35 minutes, by which times the skins had cracked, and texture remained uneven. Peeling was quite literally a pain, as it should be done while the potatoes are still fairly hot. Microwaving whole potatoes in skins did produce dry and fully mash, but as with conventional baking, a thickish and intransigent layer that formed under the skin had to be discarded. Actually the mash was too dry to absorb a sensible amount of flour. I finally resorted to peeling the spuds (overwintering maincrops are anyway likely to be heftily chemically treated), boiling in cubes for 10 minutes, then driving off excess moisture over a low heat. No discernible loss of flavour, and the texture seemed perfect for the job.

Mashing the potatoes. There's only one sensible method: use a ricer, or a mouli as second choice.



Blending the mixture. Forget instructions to knead for 4 minutes. Bring mash, flour and salt together with a fork (yes, it seems unlikely at first) then knead lightly for a minute or two before rolling and cutting.

Flouring surfaces. Hazan and others tell you to flour everything: work surfaces, fingers, thumbs, knife, fork – the cat. Forget it. You don't need to flour anything at all unless you have added egg. In which case, yes, flour everything, but lightly.

Forming the gnocchi. A 'lifetime's skill' I acquired in a moment. OK, I won't claim masterly perfection, but ended up with the requisite 'hollow' middle and ridged edges at the first attempt. You could cop out, as does Delia, simply cutting and sometimes pressing little squares against the tines of a fork. But nothing could be simpler than rolling a cut length of dough from one concave end of a fork to the

other, holding it in place with your thumb, then lifting off with the aid of a finger. I'm not sure I ever developed a skilled flick but I didn't really feel the need for one, either.



Simmering and draining. Not quite the split-second affair too often portrayed. A batch (12–15) of gnocchi tipped into a widish saucepan of bubbling, salted water will rise to the surface within 1–1½ minutes. They could probably do with a further 30 seconds' or so cooking but a little less or more won't make much difference. Much more and the little dumplings will soften and mis-shape, unless a commercially-comparable quantity of flour is added. Eggy gnocchi need about 30 seconds longer and are less likely to over-soften. Remove from the pot with a slotted spoon or skimmer and drain briefly on kitchen towel, then tip onto a plate, ideally buttered or oiled, but this is not crucial. The gnocchi will firm as they cool.

THE RECIPE

350g maincrop potato, preferably King Edward (see notes above)

50g soft flour ('00' or 'patisserie')

½ tsp sea salt

Method

Peel the potatoes and cut into chunks.

Cook in rapidly boiling, salted water until tender – about 10 minutes.

Drain well, then return to a low heat to drive off excess moisture, shaking the pan from time to time.

Press the potato through a ricer into a mixing bowl.

Add the flour (no need to sift) and the salt and bring the mixture together with a fork.

Knead lightly for a minute or two until you have something resembling soft shortbread.

Divide this into two and roll out into two ropes, about 2–3cm thick. With a sharp knife, cut off 3cm lengths.

Roll briefly in the palm of your hand to a marble shape, then place the thumb of one hand in the centre of one piece and roll or flick from one end (it doesn't matter which) of the tines of a fork to the other, finishing the curve by lifting or flicking the gnocchi with a finger of the same hand.



Assemble the finished shapes on a plate (floured if you wish; it's not necessary if you cook the gnocchi at once) or greaseproof paper.

You can cook one half while shaping the other. Tip the formed gnocchi, in one go, into bubbling salted water.

Reduce to a low simmer, wait until the gnocchi have floated to the surface, then allow them a further 15–30 seconds before removing with a slotted spoon onto kitchen paper, and tumbling onto a tray or oven-proof dish.



If you want to check the consistency, cut one open and test if for softness and possible flouriness, adjusting the cooking time if necessary.

Reheat with butter or chosen sauce, in the microwave or oven.

Gnocchi with Egg

350g maincrop potato

1 medium free-range egg yolk plus 50g plain, soft flour OR

2 medium free-range egg yolks plus 75g plain, soft flour

Rounded ½ tsp sea salt

Method

Follow the recipe exactly as before, incorporating the egg yolk(s) with the flour and salt, first with a fork, then by hand.

When it comes to rolling and shaping, you will need to flour all surfaces as well as the knife, fork and plate to prevent the dough sticking. Don't add more flour to the dough itself, though.

The gnocchi will take a little longer to rise to the surface when simmering, and can be cooked 30 seconds longer without coming to any harm.

Advance Prep

The mash can be prepared in advance with flour and salt (and egg) added when convenient, but I found it a little easier to mix everything whilst still warm. If you let the mixture stand any length of time before shaping, you may find you need to add more flour to make it manageable – best to make and shape, and indeed cook, in one go. Cooked gnocchi can be kept in a closed container in the fridge for a day or two, but will not taste quite as fresh as those used immediately. They will also freeze successfully for a few weeks.

Sauces

The Italian rule is simple saucing for eggless gnocchi, robust tomato sauces and ragùs for eggy ones. I suggest you try your first batch simply with a little melted butter or warm olive oil and a light grating of cheese (good Cheddar or parmesan). You can layer with butter and melting cheese and place in a hot oven for 5 minutes, just long enough for the cheese to melt. Sprinkle with crisp, crumbled bacon or fried breadcrumbs if you like. Then experiment with a variety of sauces.



Further Information

Websites which list and/or sell specialist or 'conventional' eating and seed potatoes:

<http://www.jbaseedpotatoes.co.uk/>

<http://www.specialistpotatoes.co.uk/index.html>

<http://www.heritage-potatoes.co.uk/>

<http://varieties.potato.org.uk/menu.php> (Potato Council)

<http://www.ikea.com/gb/en/catalog/products/00028570>

- to mail order Abbas Ansjovisfiléer from IKEA (if you don't have a store near you). Ignore the rather daft English descriptor, these are indeed the pickled sprats.