

POTATOES

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Pommes Anna is made by cooking a few layers of sliced potatoes and butter. The butter helps the layers of sliced potatoes adhere to each other so that, when the whole thing is removed from the skillet, you have something that resembles a crustless potato pie. And because it is prepared like an upside-down cake, with the gorgeously browned bottom layer served on top, the presentation is stunning.

Still, the best part of Pommes Anna is the taste. It is potatoes swimming in butter, with salt. The only thing that could make it better is if the butter is browned first, which creates a deliciously nutty flavor that puts the dish over the top.

I wanted to put potatoes to everyday use, too, so I cooked them in one of my favorite ways, Rosemary-Roasted Potatoes. It's one of my weeknight potato preparations.

What makes this simple method stand out is the roasting. In the dry, hot heat of the oven, the chunks of potato puff out a little. They become ethereally soft in the middle, with a golden-brown crust on the outside.

Actually, that wouldn't be bad as is, but these potatoes are extra-wonderful because of a few simple ingredients that add so much to the overall dish. With olive oil, chopped rosemary, a few crushed red pepper flakes and the all-important salt, you can make it on Wednesday but it tastes like Sunday.

As much as we love potatoes in this country, they may like them even more in Spain. So I decided to make a Spanish dish, Patatas a la Riojana. This classic dish from the north of the country is a potato stew with a delectable, spicy sauce—but you can make it mild if you prefer.

Several factors go into making this stew so hearty and satisfying. First of all, of course, are the potatoes, which are the textbook definition of hearty and satisfying in any language. A substantial amount of paprika is also important, providing the right Spanish piquancy to the mélange of flavors.

If you're not making a vegetarian version, sausage also comes into play—either a Spanish-style chorizo or a garlicky kielbasa will do. And surprisingly, the starch from the potatoes themselves adds immensely to the texture. It mixes with water that you add to the pot to create a thick and fragrant sauce that coats the potatoes and makes you feel good about life in general.

Each of these dishes is better than the last. Once again, they prove that when you say spud, you've said it all.



Hillary Levin/St. Louis Post-Dispatch-TNS

Potato puffs taste a bit liked mashed potatoes.

CRISPY FRENCH FRIES

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

2 Russet (Idaho) potatoes Oil for frying Salt

1. Peel potatoes and cut into long strips ½-inch wide and ½-inch high. Heat oil in a Dutch oven to 320 degrees. Carefully place some of the potatoes in the oil—do this in several batches to assure they are not crowded and that oil temperature does not fall too far below 320 degrees. Cook until just barely beginning to turn brown, about 6 to 8 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon to a plate lined with paper towels. Repeat with remaining batches.
2. Raise oil temperature to 375 degrees. In batches, carefully place some of the fries in the oil. Fry until golden brown, about 2 to 3 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon to a plate lined with paper towels, and salt generously while still hot. Repeat with remaining batches. Serve hot.

Per serving (based on 4): 281 calories; 16g fat; 2g saturated fat; no cholesterol; 4g protein; 33g carbohydrate; 1g sugar; 2g fiber; 9mg sodium; 24mg calcium

— Traditional recipe

POTATO PUFFS

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

2 medium Yukon Gold potatoes, about 6 ounces each, washed Salt ½ cup milk 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces ½ cup all-purpose flour 2 large eggs About 3 cups canola oil, for deep frying

1. Put the potatoes in a pot with cold water to cover, add ½ teaspoon salt and bring to a boil. Boil gently for 40 minutes, until very tender; be sure the potatoes are always

covered with water during cooking. Drain the potatoes.

2. When they are cool enough to handle, peel the potatoes, cut into chunks and push through a food mill or ricer.

3. Combine the milk, ¼ teaspoon salt, the pepper and the butter in a heavy saucepan and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat and add the flour all at once, working the mixture with a wooden spoon until it forms a ball. Return to the stove and cook for 30 seconds over low heat, stirring the mixture, which will become a shiny, homogenous mass. Transfer to a bowl and let cool for 5 minutes.

4. Add the eggs to the dough one at a time, beating well with a whisk after each addition, then stir in the potatoes (you could also put the dough in a food processor and, with the motor running, add the eggs; process for 15 to 20 seconds, then combine in a bowl with the mashed potatoes).

5. Preheat oven to 160 degrees.

6. Heat 1½ to 2 inches of oil in a deep 10- to 12-inch skillet to 350 degrees. Spoon 1 tablespoon of the dough at a time into the oil, pushing it out of the spoon with your finger; cook 10 to 15 pieces at a time. Cook for 8 to 10 minutes, turning the puffs in the oil to brown them evenly on all sides.

7. As soon as the first batch is done, remove with a slotted spoon to a tray lined with paper towels. Keep hot in oven while you cook the remaining puffs. Sprinkle lightly with salt and serve. Puffs will lose their crispness if they sit too long.

Per serving (based on 6): 645 calories; 62g fat; 8g saturated fat; 77mg cholesterol; 5g protein; 22g carbohydrate; 2g sugar; 2g fiber; 425mg sodium; 47mg calcium

— Recipe from "Essential Pepin" by Jacques Pepin

POMMES ANNA

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

GARDENING

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Maybe build a new raised bed or start amending existing beds. Any chore that will get you outside to stretch and bend is helpful.

• Garden to add beauty: Think of the garden as another room to be enjoyed whether you are inside or outside the house. When the time is right for us, looking at a colorful container near the

front door or on a patio can lower blood pressure. Think of adding shrubs and trees for color and for shelter for birds.

• Garden to learn: How many times have you looked at a leaf or an insect and thought "I wonder"? Now is a good time to make finding the answers a priority. Learning more about insects might even be the encouragement you need to discontinue use of pesticides.

• Garden to meet people: Gardening is a great way to expand your social

circle. It's also a great conversation starter.

Also included in the listing of top 10 reasons were: Garden to make money, garden to be creative—try something new, garden for emotional needs and spiritual connections and garden for lasting memories. Lastly, you probably have your own reasons. List them in your garden journal and review them occasionally to be sure you are still on track.

Per serving (based on 4): 323 calories; 15g fat; 9g saturated fat; 38mg cholesterol; 5g protein; 45g carbohydrate; 3g sugar; 7g fiber; 919mg sodium; 30mg calcium

— Recipe from foodrepublic.com, by Clotilde Dusoulier

ROSEMARY-ROASTED POTATOES

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

1 pound red-skinned potatoes, scrubbed and quartered 2 tablespoons olive oil 1 tablespoon fresh rosemary, chopped 1 tablespoon chopped garlic ½ teaspoon salt, or to taste Pinch of crushed red pepper

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.
2. Combine potatoes, olive oil, rosemary, garlic, salt and pepper flakes in a mixing bowl. Toss to coat well.
3. Spread the potatoes in a single, even layer on a baking sheet. Roast, stirring occasionally, until cooked through and lightly golden, 20 to 35 minutes, depending on the size of the pieces. Serve immediately.

Per serving (based on 4): 147 calories; 7g fat; 1g saturated fat; no cholesterol; 2g protein; 20g carbohydrate; 2g sugar; 3g fiber; 312mg sodium; 28mg calcium

— Recipe from "White Dog Café Cookbook" by Judy Wicks and Kevin Von Klause

PATATAS A LA RIOJANA (spicy potato stew)

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

- ½ cup chopped onion
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 3 pounds potatoes, peeled and thickly sliced
- 6 ounces Spanish-style paprika-flavored chorizo or garlicky kielbasa, cut into ¼-inch slices
- 1 green bell pepper, thickly sliced, optional
- ¼ cup flatleaf parsley, coarsely chopped
- 2 tablespoons sweet paprika
- 3 dried New Mexico or Anaheim chilies, soaked in water
- ¼ teaspoon hot paprika or 1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper

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