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BEYOND THE FRY: POTATO TRADITIONS THAT FEED THE WORLD

I can think of no other commonly eaten vegetable that gets as much love as the potato. It's the one item that is surely missed when not included on the menu. I've cooked delicious meals full of colorful veggies only to be asked, "Where are the potatoes?"

Easy to prepare, budget friendly, universally appealing and simply delicious, potatoes are an essential part of meals in households all over the planet. According to the USDA, potatoes are the top consumed vegetable in the USA. After wheat and rice, potatoes are the most important food crop in the world.

The potato that is cultivated worldwide has its origins in the mountains of the Andes. Archeological evidence of ancient potato scraps dates domestication to more than 12,000 years ago. Today the potato is revered in Andean culture where thousands of heirloom varieties are cultivated for use in traditional diets. At Potato Park in Peru, the "guardians of the potato" work to preserve the biodiversity of this native food crop and help Andean potato farmers respond to the challenges of climate change.

Potatoes are a nutrition powerhouse. They are packed with nutrients like vitamin C, potassium and antioxidants and are low in fat and calories. Potatoes are also high in starch, which is a simple carbohydrate that helps us feel satisfied after eating and provides our body with energy.

The starchy component is what we love about potatoes, and what makes it an important part of the traditional diets of many cultures worldwide. It's also what we hate, depending on who you ask, due to starch's role in raising blood sugar. Because of this, potatoes are often lumped in with processed foods like white bread and white rice and marked as an unhealthy choice.

Like most things in nutrition, the answers to the potato debate are complicated. The human body is a complex piece of machinery and our individual responses to food and lifestyle need to be recognized.

Control of blood sugar and insulin levels are known to be dysregulated in chronic diseases like obesity and type 2 diabetes. When researchers follow people over time, those eating more servings of potatoes per day appear to be at greater risk of developing obesity and type 2 diabetes compared with people who do not have these diseases.

Though we see an association, there is no consensus in the data that potato consumption alone is a cause for obesity or type 2 diabetes. In 2020, a group of researchers from the INTERMAP Research Group found that eating fried potatoes—but not mashed, boiled, or baked potatoes--was directly related to higher blood pressure and higher body mass in US women. However, the researchers also found that overall dietary choices were the key contributors to this relationship.

Despite all the research we do on single foods, the data tells us again what our ancestors already knew: that the quality of the whole diet is a more important contributor to health than any one food by itself. Here in the land of giant russet potatoes, our best practice is to keep potato portions small and include non-starchy vegetables and high quality fats and proteins with meals.

The texture and taste of potatoes gives them universal appeal in all cuisines. Toss them into soups for a richer, creamier broth. Roast them alone or with other root vegetables like carrots and turnips for a hearty taste of fall. Bake them in the oven for a steaming side dish. Boil and smash them to create your own version of mashed potatoes, a traditional favorite.

This month I share tried and true potato recipes that cover the basics—baked, roasted, and boiled. Do not get discouraged by the longer cooking times with oven baking. I promise the final result will fill you and your family with savory delight.

CRISPY-SKIN BAKED POTATO

2 russet potatoes
1 tablespoon olive oil
Pinch of salt (optional)

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Scrub potatoes under water and dry with paper towel. Put dried potatoes in a baking dish and prick all over with a fork. Rub the potatoes with olive oil to coat. Sprinkle salt over potatoes and put in oven. Bake for 45-55 minutes, flipping once after 25 minutes. Potatoes are ready when they are fork tender. Slice open and fluff with a fork. Top with olive oil, butter, salt, sour cream, grilled veggies, guacamole, cheese, chives, chili...the possibilities are endless.

ROASTED ROOTS

4 medium yellow potatoes
3 turnips
2 carrots
1 onion
2 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste
Pinch of rosemary or garam masala (optional)

ROASTED ROOTS (continued)

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Scrub veggies and cut into 1-inch chunks. Toss with olive oil, salt, pepper, rosemary or garam masala. Spread evenly on large baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Bake 25 minutes then remove from oven and toss on the pan. Return to oven and bake 20-30 more minutes until tender and caramelized.

BABY BOILED POTATOES

6-8 red or new potatoes

Butter or olive oil

Salt and pepper

Scrub potatoes and cut in half or quarters, depending on size. Add to a large saucepan and fill with water to cover the potatoes by an inch. Bring to a boil and simmer 15-20 minutes until fork tender. Drain potatoes and gently toss with butter or olive oil. Season with salt and pepper, and a pinch of dried garlic and rosemary, if desired.

If you'd like to learn more, I will be talking about impacts of potatoes and other carbohydrate-rich foods on blood sugar and diabetes in my upcoming ***Dining with Diabetes program in February, 2023***. This 4-week session includes diabetes education and food tastings and is open to adults with pre-diabetes or diabetes. For more information and to register, please visit go.umd.edu/dwd or call the Extension office at 301-600-1599.

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