

# 10 things to know about potatoes



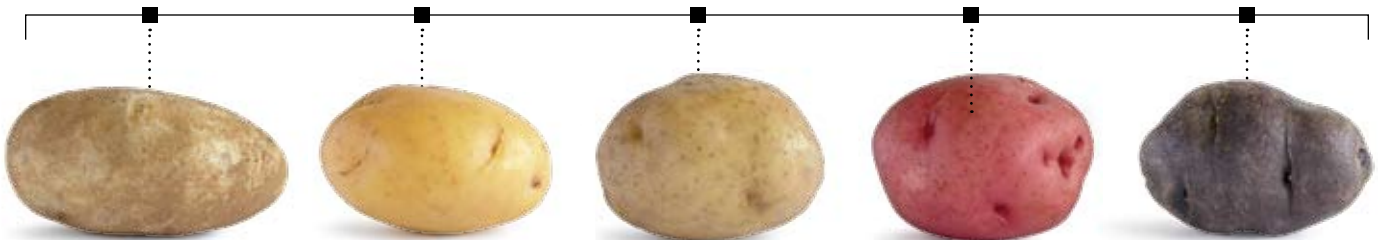
## 1) Potatoes are good for you. If you eat the skin, they're great for you.

The flesh of a medium-sized baked potato contains about 17 percent of the potassium, a third of the vitamin C, and almost 11 percent of the niacin you need in a day, with only 145 calories and little fat (until you add that pat of butter—4 grams of fat). The skin adds vitamin C and nearly 5 grams of fiber.

## 2) To bake or to microwave?

Bake. OK, if you're short on time, cut a slit in the top of each potato to let steam escape, and microwave for nine minutes. But microwaved potatoes won't cook as evenly and can have a coarse, grainy texture. Our guaranteed-great method for a perfect baked potato: Rub a russet potato with olive oil and kosher salt, and bake at 375° for an hour or until soft to the touch. Don't wrap in foil; the skin won't crisp.

## 3) The lineup: Thousands of varieties, five main types



**RUSSETS** are the most popular starchy variety for frying and baking. Usually large and oblong, with rough brown skin and white flesh.

**YELLOW-SKINNED** potatoes, like Yukon golds, have a tawny skin with dense, waxy flesh that can range from light yellow to golden.

**WHITE** potatoes have smooth, tan-colored skin and white flesh, and are available in round or long Russet-like shapes. Can be waxy or starchy.

**RED** potatoes may have smooth, ruddy skin and white, yellow, or reddish-tinged flesh. They're waxy, making them good candidates for roasting.

**BLUE & PURPLE** potatoes are the newest type on the American market. Skin and starchy flesh range from lavender to navy.

#### 4) *Yes, we buy premashed*

We've been known to quickly satisfy a craving with a refrigerated plastic tub of ready-mades, like Simply Potatoes. That said, we find instant mashed potatoes too starchy to stand in for homemade. But they're fine at thickening soups or replacing breadcrumbs in pan-frying.



#### 5) *Chip fat-math: not as bad as you'd think*

Regular fried or kettle-style potato chips have about 10 grams of fat (mostly unsaturated) and 150 calories per ounce. Baked potato chips—made from dried potatoes, binders, and such—have 8 or so grams less total fat than regular, but only 30 or 40 fewer calories.

#### 6) *Starchy vs. waxy*

Russets are nice and fluffy when baked because their densely packed starch molecules expand and separate during cooking. But they don't hold their shape well when sliced after cooking. Lower-starch waxy potatoes hold together better, so they're great for gratins and salads. When properly mashed, russets remain fluffy as they absorb fat or liquids, while waxy potatoes tend to become gummy.

#### 7) *Sweet, but this is not, in fact, a potato →*

Sweet potatoes and potatoes are as closely related as onions and asparagus—in the same botanical order, different families. Sweet potatoes are true root vegetables, an enlarged section of the root used by the plant to store energy, while potatoes are stem tubers, formed from the stem of the plant.



#### 8) *What makes a "new" potato new?*

Normally, potato vines are killed a few weeks before fall harvest and the potatoes allowed to cure underground to thicken their skins. New potatoes are harvested in spring while the vines are still alive; these baby potatoes have thin, almost papery skins (don't be surprised to see "bald" spots) and a sweeter taste than mature potatoes, thanks to sugars that haven't yet converted to starch. They cook more like waxy potatoes, regardless of the type.

#### 9) *Keep them in the dark*

Potatoes are best stored in darkness, below room temperature—45° to 55°. If you lack a root cellar, try a room-temperature cabinet or pantry. Warmth causes potatoes to wrinkle, soften, or sprout. Light can cause parts to turn green from a mildly toxic chemical called solanine (it would take about a pound of green potato to make you sick). If you cut off any green parts before cooking, you remove all risk. —Jason Horn



#### SURPRISE WINNER

#### 10) *Humble spud, haute beverage*

The marketing and packaging of premium vodkas is so overwrought, we get a bit suspicious: Does it really matter if a "neutral spirit" is made from grain, cane, beets, grapes, or potatoes? Yes! A *Cooking Light* taste test, done blind, found Chopin, a premium-priced Polish potato vodka, to be distinctively delicious.

