

# Introducing Crispy Smashed Potatoes

How do you produce spuds with mashed-potato creaminess and crackly-crisp crusts without deep-frying? It's a pressing issue.

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When it comes to potatoes, there's nothing I like better than the silky creaminess of mashed potatoes—except for the satisfying crispness you get when they're fried. So when I recently discovered a quirky recipe for something called crispy smashed potatoes, which promised an abundance of both textures in the same spud, I had to try it. The approach looked simple and straightforward: Whole skin-on potatoes are parcooked, then squashed with a masher until about a half-inch thick. These pattylike disks are then coated in oil or butter and cooked at a high enough heat to render the roughened edges and torn skin browned and crispy and the interior flesh creamy and sweet. The results aren't the prettiest, but if you can bring out the best in a potato's flavor and texture, aesthetics are moot, right? The question was exactly how to bring out those ideals.

## Small Potatoes

Every recipe I consulted parcooked the potatoes by simmering them in water. From there, the techniques divided. Some recipes called for pan-frying; others advocated roasting. Pan-frying produced nice crispness but required close supervision and lots of fat. I opted for the oven's more even heat and a baking sheet's roomier surface, which allowed me to cook enough potatoes for four in a single batch.

But when it came time to start smashing, some spuds cooperated better than others. Thick, oblong russets wouldn't budge under the press of a potato masher and needed the smack of a heavy skillet, at which point their starchy interiors crumbled into messy piles. Smaller Yukon Golds and Red Bliss potatoes (no more than 2 inches in diameter) worked far better, flattening into disks that held their shape. I also liked the way their thinner skins crisped up nicely in the oven. In the end, I preferred Red Bliss for their slightly moister, less starchy flesh.

As for cooking fat, I first tried melted butter but found that its milk solids burned long before the potatoes fully crisped, leaving them marred by bitter black patches. I settled on olive oil; applying half before smashing and drizzling on the rest after smashing ensured that it reached every nook and cranny.



These squashed potato disks aren't pretty, but their velvety centers and crisp edges more than make up for it.

## It's a Dry Heat

So far, I'd managed to achieve creamy-crispy textures and pretty good flavor. But a certain rich earthiness still eluded me. Was I washing away some of the potato flavor during parcooking? Simmering was standard among existing recipes, but let's be honest: When does boiling really improve taste? I tried spiking the cooking water with bay leaves, smashed garlic, various herbs and spices, and even bacon slices, but no hint of these came through.

Giving drier heat a try, I placed the potatoes in a large bowl and microwaved them until tender before roasting. These tasted better—but now the skins were tough and rubbery. Meanwhile, my preheated 500-degree oven was at the ready: Why not just cook the potatoes in there from start to finish? I spread them on a baking sheet and let them cook until tender on the oven's bottom rack, closest to the heat element, then proceeded with my recipe. The results were the best yet: Without the diluting effect of boiling, the creamy flesh tasted sweet, deep, and earthy.

But roasting the potatoes took a good hour, and by now dinnertime had come and gone. Trapping some steam would help break down their flesh faster, so I wrapped the baking sheet in foil. This cut the cooking time by 15 minutes. When I added a splash of water to the pan to create even more steam, it eliminated another 15 minutes. After a 10-minute rest (very hot potatoes crumbled apart when smashed), I simply pressed the potatoes right

on the sheet tray. I then returned them to the oven for an additional 35 to 45 minutes to finish: first on the top rack, where the ambient heat would thoroughly brown their exposed surfaces, then back to the bottom rack to crisp their undersides.

These were the creamy spuds encased in rough, crispy skin I'd been after, but individually smashing nearly 20 potatoes was a pain. As I glanced around the kitchen for a more efficient tool, I found the answer right in front of me: another baking sheet. I balanced it on top of another batch of parcooked potatoes and then pushed down evenly and firmly. In one fell swoop, I had perfect cracked patties—and, once they were browned and crunchy, a great new potato dish to add to my starch rotation.

## ROASTED SMASHED POTATOES

SERVES 4 TO 6

**NOTE:** This recipe is designed to work with potatoes 1½ to 2 inches in diameter; do not use potatoes any larger. It is important to thoroughly cook the potatoes so that they will smash easily. Remove the potatoes from the baking sheet as soon as they are done browning—they will toughen if left too long. A potato masher can also be used to “smash” the potatoes.

- 2 pounds small Red Bliss potatoes (about 18), scrubbed (see note)
- 6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme leaves
- Kosher salt and ground black pepper

1. Adjust oven racks to top and bottom positions and heat oven to 500 degrees. Arrange potatoes on rimmed baking sheet, pour ¾ cup water into baking sheet, and wrap tightly with aluminum foil. Cook on bottom rack until paring knife or skewer slips in and out of potatoes easily (poke through foil to test), 25 to 30 minutes. Remove foil and cool 10 minutes. If any water remains on baking sheet, blot dry with paper towel.

2. Drizzle 3 tablespoons oil over potatoes and roll to coat. Space potatoes evenly on baking sheet and place second baking sheet on top; press down firmly on baking sheet, flattening potatoes until ½ to ½ inch thick. Sprinkle with thyme leaves and season generously with salt and pepper; drizzle evenly with remaining 3 tablespoons oil. Roast potatoes on top rack 15 minutes. Transfer potatoes to bottom rack and continue to roast until well browned, 20 to 30 minutes longer. Serve immediately.

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