

# Mashed Potato Makeover

For potatoes that are elegant yet easy, we revamp a fussy French classic.

BY LAN LAM

**P**ommes duchesse are thought to be named for a fictional French aristocrat with a penchant for potatoes: The recipe was dreamed up in the 19th century to encourage consumers to use more of the lowly spuds. The elegantly swirled individual mounds of eggy, buttery, yellow-tinged mashed potatoes with crisp crusts did the trick, and for years the dish remained popular, particularly on holiday menus.

So why aren't pommes duchesse still on every special-occasion table? Well, their retro-luxe look requires a pastry bag, plus a bit of practice. What's more, being rather petite, they cool rapidly. But I had an idea: Maybe baking the potatoes casserole-style would simplify things and help keep them hot.

Traditional recipes call for stirring melted butter, eggs, half-and-half, nutmeg, salt, and pepper into peeled, boiled, and riced potatoes. I settled on 3 egg yolks, 8 tablespoons of melted butter, and  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup of half-and-half for  $3\frac{1}{2}$  pounds of buttery Yukon Golds. Following the test kitchen's mashed-potato protocol, I poured the butter into the spuds first so its fat would coat the potatoes' starch granules and protect them from being overworked and turning gluey.

After smoothing the potatoes into a buttered dish, I poured on a coating of beaten egg white, which is full of proteins that browned nicely after 30 minutes in a 450-degree oven. But the beautiful crust tore from the potatoes' surface when I dug out a spoonful. Worse, the crust was plasticky instead of crisp and light. The culprit? The egg white proteins were linking to form a tough skin. I tried a coating of melted butter instead, which contains very little protein. This casserole's surface crisped but had to be baked for 50 minutes to brown, which seemed excessive.



Holiday bonus: These rich, buttery potatoes can be made in advance and crisped just before serving.

How about a mixture of butter and egg white? After 30 minutes, this batch emerged with a crisp, burnished crust. That's because the fat in the butter acted as a hydrophobic barrier between the egg white's protein molecules, reducing the formation of tough cross-links.

As a final touch, I scored the casserole with a knife, creating plenty of sharp edges to brown. These lush potatoes, with their crisp crust and majestic name, were fit for royalty.

## DUCHESS POTATO CASSEROLE

SERVES 8 TO 10

Freshly ground nutmeg contributes heady flavor, so be sure to use it sparingly.

- $3\frac{1}{2}$  pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and sliced  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch thick
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup half-and-half
- 1 large egg, separated, plus 2 large yolks
- Salt and pepper
- Pinch nutmeg
- 10 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Grease 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Place potatoes in large saucepan and add cold water to cover by 1 inch. Bring to simmer over medium-high heat. Adjust heat to maintain gentle simmer and cook until paring knife can be slipped into and out of centers of potatoes with no resistance, 18 to 22 minutes. Drain potatoes.

2. While potatoes cook, combine half-and-half, 3 egg yolks,  $1\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoons salt,  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon pepper, and nutmeg in bowl. Set aside.

3. Place now-empty saucepan over low heat; set ricer or food mill over saucepan. Working in batches, transfer potatoes to hopper and process. Using rubber spatula, stir in 8 tablespoons melted butter until incorporated. Stir in reserved half-and-half mixture until combined. Transfer potatoes to prepared dish and smooth into even layer.

4. Combine egg white, remaining 2 tablespoons melted butter, and pinch salt in bowl and beat with fork until combined. Pour egg white mixture over potatoes, tilting dish so mixture evenly covers surface. Using flat side of paring knife, make series of  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-deep,  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide parallel grooves across surface of casserole. Make second series of parallel grooves across surface, at angle to first series, to create crosshatch pattern. Bake casserole until golden brown, 25 to 30 minutes, rotating dish halfway through baking. Let cool for 20 minutes. Serve.

**TO MAKE AHEAD:** At end of step 3, wrap dish in plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 24 hours. To serve, top and score casserole as directed in step 4 and bake in 375-degree oven for 45 to 50 minutes.

## TECHNIQUE | ALTERNATIVE POTATO PATTERNS

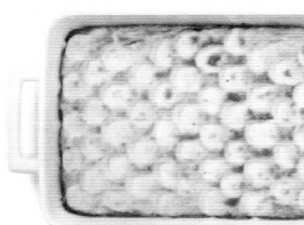
Scoring it with a knife isn't the only way to help the casserole brown and crisp. Here are three other ideas.



**WHORLED** Drag tip of chopstick across surface to create swirled design.



**ABSTRACT** Push round cookie cutter into surface and gently wiggle to widen circle. Repeat with cutters of varying sizes.



**SCALLOPED** Beginning in corner, press large offset spatula, held at angle, into surface. Repeat, aligning indents to create scalloped pattern.

## See How It's Done

A step-by-step video is available at [CooksIllustrated.com/dec17](http://CooksIllustrated.com/dec17)

