

# Simplifying Potato Galette

This crisp, earthy-tasting potato cake would be the perfect side dish—if it weren't for all the fussy layering. And does the cake have to fall apart when you slice it?

≧ BY MATTHEW CARD ≦

About once a year, I feel compelled to make *pommes Anna*, the classic French potato cake in which thin-sliced potatoes are tossed with clarified butter, tightly shingled in a skillet, and cooked slowly on the stovetop. The results can be glorious: a crisp, deeply bronzed crust encasing a creamy center that tastes of earthy, well-seasoned potatoes and sweet butter. It's about as good as non-deep-fried potatoes can get.

But despite my fondness for it, the galette is strictly special-occasion fare in my house. It's not the ingredient list—that part's brief. But thinly slicing and then diligently layering all those potato disks takes more time and attention to detail than I usually want to spend.

That said, plenty of existing recipes promise to make the dish “easy,” “simple,” and “foolproof,” but I have yet to find one that really delivers on all counts. Only one that I've tried produced anything resembling the classic potato galette, and it differed from the others in two ways: First, it was roasted in a very hot (450-degree) oven, where the steady, ambient heat cooked the three-odd pounds of potatoes evenly (no chalky bits of raw tuber) and colored them nicely brown. Second, only the first layer of 1/8-inch-thick potato slices

was neatly arranged; the rest were casually packed into the pan, eliminating most of the usual tedious layering work. Then, following tradition, the cooked galette was inverted out of the skillet, its crisp, golden exterior hiding the haphazard arrangement within.

But the recipe got me only halfway to my goal. The whole operation was still fussier than I wanted, and while the exterior of this improvised galette more or less looked the part, the tightly fused, striated layers that are the hallmark of classic *pommes Anna* were gone. And as soon as the knife hit the crust, the underlying slices slid apart.



To help ensure the potato cake slices cleanly, cut the raw potatoes no more than 1/8 inch thick.

## Easing the Way

So, there was obvious potential in roasting, and I had a simple (if not totally foolproof) assembly method for the cake—but everything else in the recipe was up for consideration. For starters, there was the pan. *Pommes Anna* is traditionally cooked in a cast-iron skillet, which absorbs heat beautifully and turns out a galette with a substantial, deeply browned crust. But considering that this new iteration was cooked in the oven—and that inverting the already heavy vessel when it's full and searing hot can be intimidating—wasn't a baking pan worth a try? But as I tested my way through square, round, ovoid, rectangular, and springform pans, every one either warped in the hot oven or failed to generate much of a crust. A skillet really was the best tool for the job, though for convenience's sake—and to avoid a risk of the cake sticking to the pan bottom—I opted to forgo cast iron in favor of an oven-safe nonstick model.

Of course I'd need to compensate for the lighter, thinner pan's browning inadequacies, so I started fiddling with the placement of the oven rack on which the potatoes were cooking. Not surprisingly, the farther I lowered the rack toward the main heating element, the deeper the spuds browned. On the advice of several colleagues, I tried to eke out even more color and flavor by placing a pizza stone under the skillet. Sure enough, the thick slab (which absorbs heat in much the same way as a cast-iron skillet) guaranteed even browning—but it also required preheating for an hour and more heavy lifting than I wanted. Ultimately, I devised a much simpler two-pronged approach that worked equally well: First I got the galette cooking on the stovetop (where the direct flame jump-started the browning process), then I slid the pan onto the bottom rack of the hot oven. That gave me great browning with no stone.

Then there was the laborious clarifying step required by most recipes. This traditional technique involves barely simmering the butter until its water has just cooked off, then removing its milk solids. The idea is that milk solids in whole butter can cause the potatoes to stick to the bottom of the pan. But when I whipped up batches of my working recipe with clarified and whole butter, I couldn't tell the difference

between the two. One more complication out of the way.

## Starch Swap

I was pleased with my progress—the galette was deeply bronzed—but one lingering problem remained: How to keep the potatoes from sliding away from each other into a messy heap when I sliced it? One contributing factor, I realized, was my informal assembly method. Simply dumping most of the potatoes into the skillet may have been easy, but the bond between the piled-on slices was fairly haphazard. Still, the lack of adhesiveness often seemed exacerbated by the potatoes themselves. Sometimes they seemed to have more starchy glue, other times they cooked up overly dry. Up to this point I'd been using russet potatoes, which virtually every *pommes Anna* recipe, classic or otherwise, calls for. Switching to Yukon Golds didn't help. Though

## Look—The Slices Stick Together

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PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

asters preferred their buttery, sweet flavor, their texture was just as unreliable as the russets, and they weren't any better at keeping the layers together.

After giving it some thought, I realized that the variable "stick-ability" of the potatoes—whether Yukons or russets—had a simple explanation: The starch in any potato is always going to be a wild card, since it changes considerably depending how long the potato has been out of the ground. To eliminate this as a variable, one of my colleagues had a suggestion: Wash away the potato starch and find

another means of gluing the slices together. Though counterintuitive, the idea was not entirely unfamiliar. A few years back we developed a recipe for potato *roesti* (pommes Anna's Swiss cousin, made with shredded spuds) in which we first rinsed the potatoes of their surface starch, then tossed them with a smidge of cornstarch to ensure cohesion.

Hopeful that the technique might transfer to my sliced potatoes—I decided to stick with the more flavorful Yukons—I proceeded with my working recipe, swirling the slices in a bowl of cold water to wash away their starch, then thoroughly patting them dry. (Excess moisture also impedes bonding.) Then I added a tablespoon of cornstarch to the melted butter, tossed the two components together, and proceeded with assembly. The result? Big improvement. Though the galette still wasn't quite as dense and compact as a meticulously layered pommes Anna is, at least the slices adhered to one another more reliably.

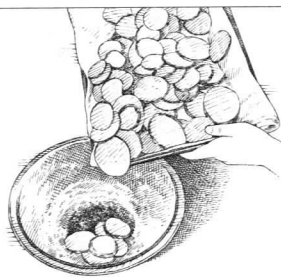
So what could I do about that loose layering of potatoes? Some recipes suggest occasionally tamping down on the galette as it cooks to compress the slices, but I wondered if more constant contact might be better. I placed a foil-wrapped brick on top of the cake for the first part of the cooking, and the layers did indeed stick together somewhat better, but unevenly—the outer rim was still loose. Rummaging around for something broader and rounder, I spied the cake pan I'd discarded earlier in my testing and thought of a novel deployment. I filled the center with pie weights, placed it on the cake, pressed down firmly, and left it on during the first 20 minutes of baking (with a sheet of nonstick-sprayed aluminum foil in between to prevent the pan bottom from sticking). After removing the cake pan halfway through cooking to allow the top layer of potatoes to take on a little color, I was delighted to find the cake not only uniformly browned, but nicely compacted as well.

The exhaustive testing paid off. Once flipped out of the pan, my crispy potato cake revealed itself to be perfectly browned and, better yet, perfectly whole. A few cuts with a serrated knife and it was ready

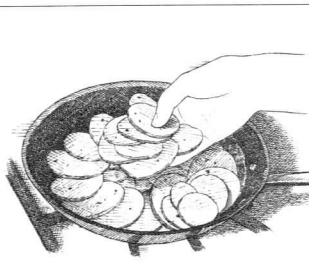
## HOW WE MADE GALETTE EASIER



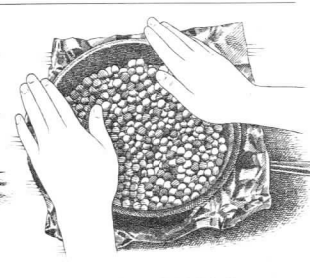
**1. REMOVE RANDOM STARCH** Rinsing the sliced potatoes and patting them dry removes their surface starch—which can vary considerably, depending on the potatoes' age.



**2. ADD SPECIFIC STARCH** Tossing the potatoes in a mixture of cornstarch and melted butter adds back a fixed amount of starch for sticking power.



**3. FREE-FORM IT** Dumping—instead of meticulously layering—most of the potatoes onto a single neatly arranged layer cuts out much of the usual fuss.



**4. PRESS IT DOWN** Pressing down on the galette with a pan full of pie weights compresses the slices so they stick to each other. Leave the pan on during baking for further compression.

to serve—completely looking the part of a classic pommes Anna. I, however, knew the truth: It took an easy few minutes to assemble, cooked largely unattended, and, best yet, was foolproof.

### POTATO GALETTE

SERVES 6 TO 8

**NOTE:** In order for the potato cake to hold together, it is important to slice the potatoes no more than 1/8 inch (3 mm) thick and to make sure the slices are thoroughly dried before assembling the cake. Use a mandoline slicer or the slicing attachment of a food processor to slice the potatoes uniformly thin. A pound of dried beans, rice, or coins can be substituted for the pie weights. For an alternate method for unmolding the galette, see page 31.

- 2½ pounds (5 to 6 large) Yukon Gold potatoes, scrubbed and sliced 1/8 inch thick (see note)
- 5 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1½ teaspoons chopped fresh rosemary leaves (optional)

**1.** Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 450 degrees. Place potatoes in large bowl and fill with cold water. Using hands, swirl to remove excess starch, then drain in colander. Spread potatoes onto kitchen towels and thoroughly dry.

**2.** Whisk 4 tablespoons butter, cornstarch, salt, pepper, and rosemary (if using) together in large bowl. Add dried potatoes and toss until thoroughly coated. Place remaining tablespoon butter in heavy bottomed 10-inch ovenproof nonstick skillet and swirl to coat. Place 1 potato slice in center of skillet then overlap slices in circle around center slice, followed by outer circle of overlapping slices. Gently place remaining sliced potatoes on top of first layer, arranging so they form even thickness.

**3.** Place skillet over medium-high heat and cook

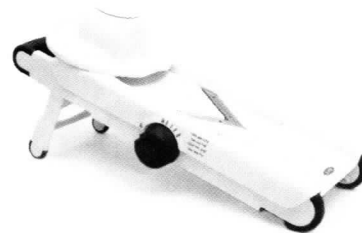
until sizzling and potatoes around edge of skillet start to turn translucent, about 5 minutes. Spray 12-inch square of foil with nonstick cooking spray. Place foil, sprayed side down, on top of potatoes. Place 9-inch cake pan on top of foil and fill with 2 cups pie weights. Firmly press down on cake pan to compress potatoes. Transfer skillet to oven and bake 20 minutes.

**4.** Remove cake pan and foil from skillet. Continue to cook until potatoes are tender when paring knife is inserted in center, 20 to 25 minutes. Return skillet to medium heat on stovetop and cook, gently shaking pan (use potholder—handle will be hot), until galette releases from sides of pan, 2 to 3 minutes.

**5.** Off heat, place cutting board over skillet. With hands protected by oven mitts or potholders, using 1 hand to hold cutting board in place and 1 hand on skillet handle, carefully invert skillet and cutting board together. Lift skillet off galette. Using serrated knife, gently cut into wedges and serve immediately.

### Faster and More Uniform Than a Chef's Knife

To make quick work of thin-slicing the potatoes in our galette, we turn to a mandoline. Our favorite model from OXO (\$49.99) sports a razor sharp V-blade that easily pierces foods; a wide, sturdy gripper guard that keeps your hands out of harm's way; and a measurement-marked dial for accuracy.



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