

HAUTE POTATO Soup

The versatile potato potage absorbs the trendiest ingredients and techniques chefs dream up just in time for fall and winter.

By Jody Shee

POTATO SOUP and chicken share something in common—commonality. To a creative chef, that's the beauty of both. You've no doubt addressed chicken in inspiring ways. Now, as you take your menu and your guests through the colder months ahead, consider innovative ways to readdress potato soup.

Everything is up for examination, including potato varieties with their starchiness or waxiness. Consider a new approach to your base, your add-ins and your toppings. Even a change in tried-and-true techniques could lead to surprising results. Do you boil or roast the potatoes

first? Is it better to hand mix or use a blender/processor? If you're thinking, "It's just potato soup," you could be missing something others are onto.

VARIETY AND STARCH FACTORS

While shape, color and size are main considerations among the nearly 100 potato varieties available, there are only two cooking-quality considerations: mealy/floury and waxy. Floury potatoes are higher in starch, and waxy potatoes are higher in sugar. "It can be deceptive as to which is high in which," says Ulrich Koberstein, group director, culinary arts, for Destination Kohler and Old Course

Hotel Golf Resort & Spa, which includes the five-diamond resort-hotel The American Club in Kohler, Wis. For the natural thickening agent, he likes to use starchy potatoes, and he has a method to determine which ones are starchy.

Koberstein places the potato in a brine of 1 part salt to 11 parts water by weight. Waxy potatoes float; starchy ones sink. While he selects starchy potatoes for soup, he has a way to adjust the soup's thickness by adjusting the potato's starch level. For a thinner soup, he peels and cuts the potatoes and places them in cold water for a few hours. The water draws the

This Quick and Healthy Potato Soup simply combines russet potatoes with celery, onion and carrot seasoned slightly with thyme and garlic salt.

Farmers Market Fingerling Potato Soup

Randy Zweiban, Chef/Owner

Province

Chicago

Yield: 1 gallon

8 cups whole fingerling potatoes

6-8 cups canola oil

1 cup leeks, white part only

2 T. roasted garlic purée

8 cups vegetable stock

Freshly toasted ground black pepper and

kosher salt, to taste

1½ cups peeled, diced carrot

1 cup peeled, diced parsnip

1 cup peeled, diced turnip

1 cup plain yogurt

¼ cup orange juice, reduced to 1 T.

1 t. toasted ground cumin

1 t. toasted ground coriander

1 T. chopped fresh Italian parsley

1 t. fresh thyme

1) Heat oven to 350°F. Scrub and dry potatoes. Put in pan with oil (enough to completely cover potatoes); cover with foil. Roast until easily pierced with knife, about 30 minutes. Cool. 2) Cook leeks slowly over low heat in 4-5 T. oil until very soft. 3) In high-speed blender, combine potatoes, garlic and leeks. Add 4 cups vegetable stock; continue adding until right consistency. Season with salt and pepper. 4) Coat carrot, parsnip and turnip with oil; season with salt and pepper. Roast at 350°F. 5) Whip yogurt in bowl with reduced orange juice, cumin, coriander, parsley and thyme. Season with salt and pepper. 6) In soup bowl, place 4 T. warm vegetables; top with 1 t. yogurt. Pour soup tableside over vegetables (6 oz. liquid).

starch out and to the bottom of the bowl. He pours out the water with the starch and adds the potatoes to the soup pot.

For a completely white potato soup, Koberstein adds a little lemon juice to keep the potatoes from oxidizing. But for one of his favorites—potato/sausage soup—he wants a little caramelized color. He boils russet potatoes in chicken stock or water until soft, blends them in the blender until smooth, then puts the mixture through a chinois “for that lovely, smooth, silky texture without pieces.” Then he pan-fries a spicy sausage such as andouille until it turns a little brown, dices it and folds it into the soup, seasons with salt and pepper and finishes with chopped cilantro. For added color and intrigue, he adds a little of the browned oil from the sausage back into the soup mixture.

Susan Goss, chef/co-owner of Chicago's West Town Tavern, insists that russets are

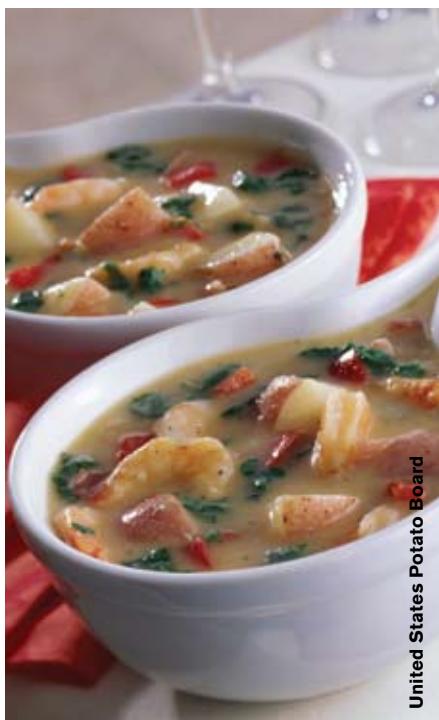
the best for potato soup. She boils them in water with salt and such aromatics as thyme and bay leaves, then drains and mixes with a hand blender, never a food processor, “lest they turn into glue.” Then she may add cream or vegetable or chicken stock. For chunkiness, she will add cooked waxy potato pieces, which hold their shape better. These could be red fin, Yukon gold or rose potatoes. If the waxy potatoes are small enough, she doesn’t even peel them, preferring the rustic texture of the peels.

Nearly any potato variety is fair game for potato soup in Randy Zweiban’s mind. He is chef/owner of Province in Chicago, with a focus on Modern American cuisine with

This Cajun Shrimp Potato Chowder combines cubed red potatoes, red bell peppers, shrimp and spinach. It gets much of its flavoring from onions, garlic powder, dry mustard and paprika.

Latin soul. “I’m always looking for different styles and varieties—everything from Russian bananas to rose fins,” he says. “German butterballs are nice, as are red thumbs and Yukon golds.” He also likes to work with blue/purple potatoes.

But one thing he is settled on. Rather than boil the potatoes first, he confits them in oil with the skin on and peels them later. “Roasting or confiting them is a much better way to start than boiling or simmering. You keep a lot more starch, richness and more of that real potato flavor,” he says. Additionally, it gives them a creamy texture and allows them to all cook through evenly and consistently. Zweiban purées the potatoes with other ingredients, which could be vegetable stock and roasted garlic. In the fall, he usually adds a variety of tubers, such as carrots or parsnips from local farms.



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FLAVORS

Red potatoes are the key to this Mexican Chicken Potato Soup that includes corn and Anaheim chili peppers and is spiced with garlic and cumin.

ADD SOME STYLE

Some chefs begin their potato soup with a base or concept firmly in mind that makes them and their soup stand out.

At Morgan's in the desert at La Quinta Resort & Club in La Quinta, Calif., the foundation for the potato soup is likely to be Yukon gold potatoes and Granny Smith apples—it's what executive chef Jimmy Schmidt likes—and to that he adds a little ginger, then cooks the mixture in cider. He purées the mixture until smooth and thins it to the desired texture with fresh Granny Smith apple juice.

Potato and apple soup is also a standard fall offering at West Town Tavern. Goss uses 60% potatoes/40% apples, and adds a little hard cider, onion, celery and vegetable stock, finishing with a bit of cream, salt and pepper, and garnishing with blue cheese croutons.

If you eat potato soup at South Gate on Central Park South, New York, the base will undoubtedly be russet potatoes and leeks, a hot variation of vichyssoise. All the salt executive chef Kerry Heffernan plans to use in the soup, he adds when he sweats the leeks to marry the flavor in the early stage and so the salt can help break down the cellulose fibers of the leeks. (He uses only the white center portion.) "The basic soup uses chicken stock, but at this point, you could use fish or clam to create a different result," he says.

Yes to a hot vichyssoise variation at Whistling Straits Restaurant at The American Club



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Resort Hotel. The restaurant can't take its Whistling Straits Potato Leek Soup off the menu, or there'd be an uprising, Koberstein says. One of the flavor keys is that the scallions and leeks are grilled first to get the smoke flavor. The other standout of the soup is that the server brings it to the table with a shot of sherry for the guest to pour into the soup and stir around (though some just choose to drink the sherry straight).

Zweiban with Province takes another creative tableside-service approach to remind guests that they are in an upscale cafe. A guest receives a bowl with layered ingredients on the bottom, and the server brings the hot potato soup and pours it on top of the mixture in front of the guest.

"It lets people see what's in the soup, and it makes for a nice presentation," Zweiban says. Those ingredients might be warm cooked leeks and diced potatoes. Or it could be carrots and yogurt whipped with

toasted and ground cumin, coriander and/or paprika. In that case, the potato soup might be made with blue/purple potatoes, so when the customer stirs it, there are white streaks through the soup from the yogurt. If he has a vegetable mixture in the bottom of the bowl, Zweiban might sprinkle chopped and pulsed Spanish Marcona almonds on top, so when the soup is poured in, the rich nuts give a nice flavor and bite.

The little something different in the Potage Lyonnaise at The Inn At Pleasant Lake, New London, N.H., is balsamic vinegar added to the soup made with potatoes, Spanish onions, vegetable or chicken stock, heavy cream and salt, pepper and sugar, to taste. "We get a lot of mileage from the flavor, once it's completed," says chef/owner Brian MacKenzie. It's a popular menu item, partly because it's a satisfying soup for vegetarians. The balsamic vinegar's acidity brightens the flavor.

To add big flavor, Indian curry is a good and easy way to go in soups with a potato/leek base, such as Heffernan's at South Gate. Simply reserve a small portion of the potato/leek base, sweat the curry powder out in butter, add a little water to turn it into a paste, add it to the reserved base and swirl that in with the rest of the soup. "It creates a dynamic element in the bowl," he says.

TOP IT OFF

Toppings are the final way to make potato soup stand out—with flavor, crunch or intrigue. Heffernan believes you can't go wrong with a seafood topping, such as smoked salmon or lobster. "Potatoes are a great medium to highlight some of these flavors," he says. Also, an herb garnish is always appropriate, whether it's chopped sprigs or oil.

Whatever vegetables Zweiban is working with as the base in the bottom of the bowl, he may come back with them—shaved and fried—as a topping, which could be fennel, carrots, leeks, parsnips and/or almonds. "I love that sort of haystack," he says. "Yes, they will wilt, but it adds another element and texture to the soup."

Koberstein likes the Irish nachos that are popular in bars now as a potato soup topping, that is, potato slices turned crunchy "nacho" and topped with ground meats, cheese and scallions. "It's a nice topping, like a loaded potato floating on top of the soup. We do a bit of that here," he says.

MacKenzie likes to top the soup with crispy string potatoes or gougeres (savory choux pastry with cheese) to cleanse the palate.

For Schmidt with Morgan's, as long as he's making potato and apple soup with ginger in it, he likes to take some of the ingredients and make them crunchy toppers, as in fried ginger or julienned apple salad.

Potato soup could be considered bland or neutral. "I see that as a positive," says Koberstein. "You can add flavors to change the profile. The fact that it's neutral makes it more versatile."

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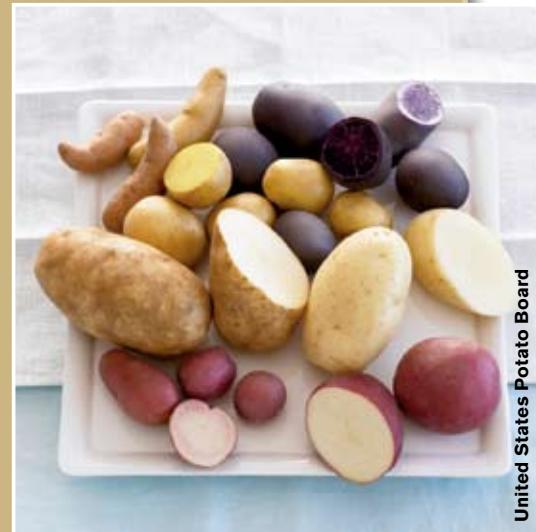
THE RIGHT POTATO FOR THE JOB

Varieties can make all the difference to a soup, but which ones for what purposes? Meredith Myers, manager of public relations for the United States Potato Board, Denver, offers some insight.

RUSSETS are great in puréed soups because they are starchy and break down easily, adding a creamy flavor and texture. They can be sliced and simmered in broth or milk until tender, or bake them and then scoop out the flesh. (Smoking potatoes over wood chips after baking adds a flavorful twist.)

YELLOW-FLESH potatoes, diced and deep-fried, make a great garnish to add visual and textural contrast for elegant puréed soups in which potatoes are the primary flavor or complement other vegetables such as carrots, leeks or watercress.

WAXY potatoes such as fingerling and yellow-flesh are an excellent choice for



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chunkier soups where the potato will not be blended, because they retain their shape. Their buttery flavor marries well with winter greens such as escarole and kale, and with cured pork products, such as bacon, pancetta and sausage.

REDSKIN potatoes unpeeled and cubed add color to rustic vegetable soups, whether vegetarian or meat-based.