



The Humble Potato

Originating in South America, it's one of the most versatile and simply delicious ingredients in cooking—potatoes deserve their due

Paola Westbeek is a food, wine and travel journalist who has tasted her way through Europe, interviewing chefs, visiting vineyards and reviewing restaurants. Her work has appeared in *FRANCE Magazine* and other publications



I WAS ONCE again reminded of the potato's numerous culinary virtues this past summer when I discovered a seemingly simple dish at one of the market stalls in the Provençal town of Vaison-la-Romaine. Next to a selection of cooked vegetables, I spotted what looked like *röstis*, the traditional Swiss pancakes made with grated potatoes and often served with eggs, cheese and other hearty toppings. These palm-sized patties, however, called "*criques*" and hailing from the Ardèche, needed no embellishments, I was assured by the vendor.

I purchased two, frankly not expecting much more than grated, fried potatoes, but my biases were soon dispelled. Once you bite through their golden and crisp outer layer, *criques* taste like garlic-infused, fluffy mashed potatoes. Truly, they are a work of culinary artistry—one of the many—with potatoes in the leading role.

Potatoes are indigenous to the Andes region of South America

and were introduced to Europe by the Spanish in the 16th century. Originally met with suspicion, they were believed to be poisonous and better suited as pig feed. Luckily, towards the end of the 18th century, potatoes gained acceptance as a highly nutritious food source. In fact, in 1787, Antoine-Augustin Parmentier (French army pharmacist and one of the greatest

foods) is the *beni imo*, a purple sweet potato that is one of the staples of the Okinawan diet, believed to be one of the healthiest in the world.

Nevertheless, thanks to the war on carbohydrates in recent years, potatoes are sometimes unfairly shunned when, in fact, it isn't the potato that is unhealthy or fattening, but rather the way it is prepared. A baked sweet potato,

POTATOES FORM THE CORNERSTONE OF DIETS, IN ALL THEIR WONDERFUL SHAPES AND COLOURS

potato advocates) was said to have organised a sumptuous potato banquet at Les Invalides in Paris in an attempt to prove their nutritional and gourmet merit to others.

Throughout history, this humble tuber has been one of the most versatile ingredients in cooking, forming the cornerstone of diets across the globe, in all their wonderful shapes and colours. While in the Western world, we are fond of the white varieties, for example, in Asia, Africa and South America, preference is given to the sweet potato. Especially intriguing and chock full of anthocyanins (pigments with powerful antioxidant properties found in purple, dark-red and blue



brightened up with a spritz of lemon or lime, topped with a dollop of natural yoghurt and garnished with finely chopped chives or dill, cannot be put into the same category as a cone of salty, deep-fried potatoes (as delicious as this certainly is from time to time). Naturally low in fat, potatoes are a great source of fibre, potassium and vitamins B and C. Plus, they are inexpensive and practically made for the colder months ahead.

Curries immediately come to mind when thinking about comforting winter dishes made with potatoes. The beautifully fragrant aloo curry (consisting of chunks of white potatoes, chopped onions, tomatoes and warming spices such

as cumin, coriander and turmeric) is a fine example. As are curries made with sweet potatoes, red chillis, chickpeas and coconut milk. With mushroom season in full swing, I am especially partial to making a decadent potato gratin with earthy porcinis and a few heaping spoonfuls of aromatic black truffle tapenade (significantly more affordable than the real stuff and also great stirred through creamy pasta dishes). Served in all its bubbling glory with a crisp green salad and an aged Chardonnay, it's the ultimate restorative dish and one that works equally well as an elegant side for festive dinners this coming holiday season.

Perhaps one of my favourite potato dishes is a focaccia of purple vitelottes. Unlike the sweet and starchy beni imos of Japan, vitelotte potatoes have a distinctly nutty taste and a denser texture. Simply make your favourite focaccia bread recipe and crown it with a layer of paper-thin slices of vitelotte potatoes that have been coated in a peppery olive oil mixed with crushed garlic. Scatter with rosemary and sea salt flakes and bake as usual. Cut into small squares, the potato focaccia is a handsome accompaniment to a robust vegetable soup, but it's also delightful on its own, warm straight out of the oven and paired with a rustic Chianti. ■



We Will Remember Them

Armistice Day was made official by King George V and first marked on November 11, 1919, a year after the end of the First World War, with a two-minute silence

The red poppy is the symbol of remembrance in many countries, including the UK because the battlefields in Western Europe saw the flower grow

The National Service of Remembrance is held every year on Remembrance Sunday (the first Sunday after November 11, this year the next day)

The UK service takes place at the Cenotaph Hall in Whitehall, London and includes the royal family, politicians and the armed forces

In 2022, King Charles started the service for the first time by laying a wreath of poppies at the Cenotaph. Around 100,000 veterans joined the march last year

SOURCE: CALENDARR.COM