



CORRECT

LINE

COOKING

## *The Elevated Spud*

Potatoes have been much on my mind (and in my mouth) recently. A friend virtually shrieked in a restaurant at finding them on her plate; such is the unfortunate reputation of this vegetable as a corruptor of the thin. Potatoes are often seen by those who seek to reduce themselves as on a par with beer and dripping, chocolate eclairs and pav.

It is time for lovers of the poignant and useful vegetable to speak out in its defence. It is a vegetable replete with goodness, both vitamins and minerals. In its unprocessed form, the potato is surely the most beautiful of vegetables, whether at a petite adolescent size or in the full, sprawling Rubens-like folds of a really big one.

I am not the only person to have been beguiled by the dimpled potato. Redcliffe Salaman devoted 40 years of his life to spudology, culminating in the definitive (ie, very long) *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*. This passionate book looks at the potato from all angles, from its origins in South America (some would dispute this) to a chapter on the Potato in the Realm of Art.

Salaman also looks at the use of the potato as a form of social control by the English in Ireland. The nutritious nature of the potato was used as a means for maintaining subsistence wages for labourers; Salaman shows that it was "designedly forced" on workers with a view to reducing wages. When the potatoes were hit by disease, English domination of the area got even more of a boost, and the use of food as part of colonial or neo-colonial strategy is with us still.

None of us is likely to be solely reliant on potatoes for our nutritional needs. Which is just as well when we consider how they are usually served up today. The round beauty of the potato which speaks of earth and dirt is sacrificed to packaging needs, so that "fries" greet us, and pre-cooked and fat saturated potato snacks await us in the freezer section of the supermarket. The vitamins have been washed away, and the price bears no relation to the cost of the main ingredient. Redcliffe Salaman would turn in his deep-hoed grave at what has been done to his beloved tuber.

I now present two recipes for the potato. One is healthier than the other, but both revel in the taste and texture of the wholesome spud. For if the shape of the potato is enough to make even the thick-skinned marvel, its taste and smell are surely portents of heaven's air-conditioning system.

### *The Healthier Recipe*

This is one of my own, although not without precedent and in deference to the author of *The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, I have named it Redcliffe's Revenge.

Take four large potatoes and scrub/wash clean. Do not remove the skins. Bake, until quite soft. Let cool a little and then cut them in half. Using a spoon or fork, take out some of the flesh from each half potato and mash it about a bit. Mix with a small amount of ricotta or feta cheese (feta has a stronger flavour), some cooked and chopped silver

beet or spinach and some pine nuts and lots of pepper. Fill the potatoes with the mixture, heaping it over the top. Put back in the oven until the stuffing is heated through. These make a great meal with salad or green vegetables and the wonderful bulk of the potato shines through.

The Less Healthy Recipe with a Difficult Name:

### *Dauphinois Potatoes.*

First catch your dolphin. Seriously, folks, put that driftnet away, dig up some potatoes and peel them. You could leave the skins on, but the whole *raison d'être* of this recipe is to be unhealthy, like French royalty. Cut the potatoes into thin slices and arrange them in a well-buttered baking dish, in overlapping layers. Sprinkle with two crushed cloves of garlic, dot with butter, and cover with grated cheese and some ground pepper. Fill the pan with milk to the level of the top potatoes. Milk flavoured with cloves is quite nice, but you would have to do this beforehand. Bake the dish until it goes brown and almost solid. It is indescribably good.

Potatoes are cheap and delicious vegetables which can substitute for other foods, as in pies where they can take the place of pastry, or they can be the central item in a meal. Potatoholics like myself mourn the fact that many people wrongly malign this sweetest of foods. We should all be distressed by the sight of Australian farmers forced to plough tonnes of potatoes back into the ground because our government wants competition, but the "competition" is subsidised to the hilt. The souls of these potatoes, sacrificed on the altar of world trade are now with the angels, who are plump and prefer eating to harps. The eyeful, faithful potato beckons you to paradise, for a few cents a serve.

Next month: Gender and food—one-pot meals for the boys.

*Penelope Cottier.*