

MAKE-AHEAD MASHED POTATOES

MASHED POTATOES ARE THE ULTIMATE SIDE dish for all of the big holidays such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. But standing over a pot of boiling water hoping that you are not making the mashed potatoes too soon nor too late, while at the same time keeping an eye on your gravy, pies, roast, and an assortment of other side dishes, can be one of the most stressful parts of holiday cooking. We figured that being able to make a large batch of mashed potatoes a day ahead of time without sacrificing any flavor or texture would be a lifesaver for any time-crunched cook.

To start, we turned to our classic recipe for mashed potatoes, which calls for boiling 2 pounds of russets in their skins, then peeling them and passing them through a ricer or a food mill. One stick of melted butter and 1 cup of half-and-half are then gently folded into the processed potatoes, resulting in the smoothest, creamiest, richest-tasting mashed potatoes you ever dreamed of. These were everything we wanted our make-ahead mashed potatoes to be. Unfortunately, storing these mashed potatoes overnight and simply reheating them didn't work; they turned into something else entirely with a dry, super-grainy texture and off-flavors. Based on this failure, it was clear to us that we needed to start from the beginning and retest everything we thought we knew about mashed potatoes in order to find a great make-ahead version.

Could we solve any of these second-day texture issues by using a different type of potato? We tested mashes made with several lower-starch potatoes, such as Yukon Gold, red, and white potatoes against those made with our standard: russet potatoes. The Yukon Golds were the worst of the lot: stiff, heavy, and a little gluey. The red and white potatoes both had slightly better textures than the russets; they were smoother, less grainy, and felt almost velvety on the tongue. While their texture was better, their flavors were not; the red potatoes tasted dirty and a bit stinky (one taster described the taste as fishy), while the white potatoes tasted hollow and bland. Only russets provided the classic, mashed potato

flavor, and despite their graininess, everyone preferred them.

We quickly discovered that buying the potatoes loose, rather than in 5-pound bags, is better because the quality of prebagged russet potatoes is very inconsistent. The potato sizes within the bags can vary widely, and several times we found them wet and rotting (old, soft potatoes make for a grainy, less-flavorful mash). By contrast, when we chose them ourselves from the bin of loose baking potatoes, we were able to pick the best of the lot—evenly sized, firm, nongreen, bruise- and rot-free potatoes. The resulting difference in the quality of the final mashed potatoes makes a few extra minutes spent shopping well worth the effort.

Next we wondered if using heavy cream instead of half-and-half (used in our classic recipe) would make any difference in the texture of the reheated potatoes. Those made with half-and-half lacked depth of flavor and tasted almost watery when reheated, while those made with cream tasted richer and less grainy. Up to now, we had been following a ratio of one stick of butter for 2 pounds of potatoes, but we wondered if we should review this—especially since we were now using heavy cream instead of half-and-half. Testing various ratios of cream to butter, we found it best to cut the ratio of butter by more than half; additional butter made the potatoes just too heavy and obscured the earthy potato flavor.

Up until now, we had been adding just enough cream to make a decent-textured mash (not too watery, not too stiff), but found that the mashed potatoes continued to absorb liquid overnight; mashed potatoes that were at the perfect consistency the day they were made would be dry and stiff when reheated the following day. To eliminate this problem, we found we needed to make the initial consistency of the mashed potatoes quite loose. To confuse the issue further, we noted that various tasters preferred mashed potatoes with different consistencies (some liked them stiffer, while others liked them looser). Plus the quality of the potatoes as well as how carefully they were scooped out of their skins affected how much cream was necessary. Luckily, our final solution to this problem turned out to be quite simple. First, adjust the consistency

of the mashed potatoes to your preferred texture. Then, add an additional ½ cup of cream to make them looser so as to accommodate their overnight storage. When reheated the following day, the consistency will once again be ideal.

Next, we wondered if the order or time in which the butter and cream were added to the potatoes would make a difference. Adding the butter first made the potatoes grainier, and left an oily texture on the tongue. Adding the cream first made the mash taste creamier and less mealy. Wondering if some or all of the dairy should be stirred into the reheated mashed potatoes before serving for a fresher flavor, we tested a variety of batches side by side—the results were dramatic. Storing a batch of cooked, mashed potatoes without any butter or cream was a disaster. The reheated potatoes refused to incorporate evenly with the dairy and resulted in a chunky, gritty texture. Adding just a portion of the cream or butter to the reheated potatoes fared a little better, but these potatoes didn't taste nearly as smooth and cohesive as the batch where all of the dairy had been incorporated while the potatoes were freshly mashed and still hot. As we learned the hard way, there is little you can do to enhance the texture of mashed potatoes once they have cooled down.

Our make-ahead potatoes had gotten marginally better since we started, but we were still plagued by an annoying grainy texture. Up until now, we had been faithfully using our standard mashed potato-cooking method: boiling the potatoes in their skins in gently simmering water until tender, then peeling them and ricing them back into the warm pot used for cooking. It was time to put this method to the test against some other cooking methods, including peeling, slicing, and rinsing the potatoes before simmering, twice-boiling the potatoes (a technique touted in a few other books), and even microwaving the raw potatoes in a large bowl (we thought they would steam themselves). While none of these methods proved perfect, one method clearly stood above the others—microwaving. Although we were not fond of microwaving the potatoes on high for about 45 minutes and the texture of the final mash was a little rubbery, we had finally lost that annoying grainy issue.

TESTING NOTES

GETTING THE TEXTURE RIGHT

We found that the hardest part of making mashed potatoes in advance was achieving a smooth, silky texture. Here is how we did it:



1. Microwave, then Bake the Potatoes

This two-step process, rather than just boiling the potatoes, prevents the reheated mashed potatoes from tasting grainy.



2. Beat the Potatoes

After the cooked flesh is scooped out of the baked potatoes, we found it necessary to beat them in a standing mixer until smooth. Merely mashing the flesh wasn't enough and left unwelcome lumps.



3. Add Cream, then Butter

Adding the cream and butter quickly to already smooth, beaten potatoes is key for a silky—not gluey—texture.



4. Add Extra Cream

To prevent the mashed potatoes from drying out as they sit overnight, it's necessary to make them quite soupy. Add cream to your desired serving consistency, then add an additional 1/2 cup of cream to accommodate their overnight storage.

Taking a closer look at why the microwave had worked better, we wondered if it was because most of the water had been eliminated; the microwave was basically a waterless cooking method. We then tested two other potato-cooking methods that didn't submerge the potatoes in water: steaming and baking. Steaming 5 pounds of potatoes turned out to be a logistical problem requiring a large pot, a large steamer, and a cook with tough skin who could stir the 5 pounds of steaming potatoes as they cooked. Baking the potatoes then mashing them was much easier—we simply baked the potatoes until tender, then cut them open while hot and scraped out the potato flesh. The final consistency of mashed potatoes made from baked potatoes was nearly as good as that of those made from microwaved potatoes.

Next we tried baking the potatoes at different oven temperatures (at 350, 400, and 450 degrees) as well as microwaving them first briefly and then baking them.

The differences were astounding. The potatoes that were cooked at the higher heat were dry, clumpy, and had less flavor. The ones baked at 350 were decent, but could not compete with the ones that had been partially microwaved and then baked. The part microwave/part baking method was not only the fastest (it took just 46 minutes to be exact), but it produced super-silky mashed potatoes that packed great potato flavor; these were the best make-ahead potatoes yet.

Unfortunately, this new cooking method presented us with yet a new problem. Lots of small, dry chunks of potato were making it through the ricer and refusing to incorporate with the dairy, resulting in tough bits that marred the final texture. To solve this issue, we focused on the potato-mashing

technique itself. We tried twice-ricing the cooked potatoes, ricing them directly into hot liquid (so the potatoes would incorporate with the liquid without having a chance to clump), and lastly whipping them in a standing mixer. Whipping was the only method that got rid of the chunks, but it also tended to turn the potatoes a bit gluey. Smashing the potatoes up a little by hand before whipping helped reduce the whipping time (and corresponding gluey texture), and using the paddle attachment rather than the whip attachment also helped. Working with the paddle, we noted that it was best to beat just half of the cooked potatoes on high speed, then slowly add the remaining potatoes until all the clumps were gone and the potatoes were uniformly smooth. Lastly, we found that stirring the cream and butter into the beaten potatoes by hand, rather than in the mixer, ensured that the mash would not be gluey.

We had one final issue to conquer: reheating. We played around with putting the mashed potatoes in a casserole dish, then reheating them in the oven, but it just wasn't as easy or fast as reheating them in a bowl in the microwave. We then reheated various batches of mashed potatoes in the microwave at different powers, and made some interesting finds. At 100 percent power, the mashed potatoes took only 8 minutes to reheat, but the potatoes around the sides of the bowl began to dry out and seep fat. At 50 percent power, the potatoes took almost 30 minutes to reheat, but the mashed potatoes at the sides of the bowl were fine. Cutting the difference between the two heat levels, we found that medium-high power (or 75 percent) was ideal; it only took 14 minutes to reheat and it didn't ruin the potatoes around the edges. Stirring the potatoes halfway through the reheating time is absolutely necessary, as is making sure that the plastic wrap is well ventilated to allow the steam to escape.

We were pretty sure we had achieved our goal of make-ahead potatoes that tasted as good as those made the same day, but just to make sure we held a side-by-side tasting. The results? No one could tell the difference between the make-ahead mashed potatoes, and those that were made the same day!

TEST KITCHEN TIP:**Buying Good Russets**

Don't use a 5-pound bag of russet potatoes for this recipe, but rather buy loose, evenly sized baking potatoes; the bags tend to include a wild array of sizes (and quality levels), which means that the potatoes won't cook at the same rate.

Make-Ahead Mashed Potatoes

SERVES 8 TO 10

Be sure to bake the potatoes until they are completely tender; err on the side of over- rather than undercooking. You can use a hand-held mixer instead of a standing mixer, but the potatoes will be lumpier.

- 5 pounds russet baking potatoes (about 9 medium), scrubbed and poked several times with a fork
- 3 cups heavy cream, hot
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- Salt and ground black pepper

1. Adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 450 degrees.

2. Following the illustration on page 000, microwave the potatoes on high power for 16 minutes, turning them over halfway through the cooking time. Transfer the potatoes to the oven and place them directly on the hot oven rack. Bake until a skewer glides easily through the flesh, about 30 minutes, flipping them over halfway through the baking time (do not undercook).

3. Remove the potatoes from the oven, and cut each potato in half lengthwise. Using an oven mitt or a folded kitchen towel to hold the hot potatoes, scoop out all of the flesh from each potato half into a medium bowl. Break the cooked potato flesh down into small pieces using a fork, potato masher, or rubber spatula.

4. Transfer half of the potatoes to the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with the paddle attachment. Beat the potatoes on high speed until smooth, about 30 seconds, gradually adding the rest of the potatoes to incorporate, until completely smooth and no lumps remain, 1 to 2 minutes, stopping the mixer to scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl as needed.

5. Remove the bowl from the mixer and gently fold in 2 cups of the cream, followed by the butter and 2 teaspoons salt. Gently fold in up to ½ cup more of the cream as needed to reach your desired serving consistency. Once the desired serving consistency is reached, gently fold in an additional ½

cup cream (the potatoes will be quite loose; see Testing Notes on page 57).

6. **TO STORE:** Transfer the mashed potatoes to a large microwave-safe bowl and cover tightly with plastic wrap. Refrigerate for up to 2 days.

7. **TO SERVE:** Poke lots of holes in the plastic wrap with the tip of a knife, and microwave at medium-high (75 percent) power until the potatoes are hot, about 14 minutes, stirring gently halfway through the reheating time.

MASHED POTATO CASSEROLE

MASHED POTATO CASSEROLES TRANSFORM THE humble potato into a side dish that is more than the sum of its parts. Smooth, cheesy, and topped off with a crunchy topping, this casserole screams comfort food. But could it be made in advance? This stick-to-your-ribs side dish is usually ruined by loads of cream cheese and such lackluster additions as pimientos and canned beans. Our goal was to redesign the casserole into a convenient make-ahead side dish that could be prepared up to 2 days in advance and reheated without any fussing. We wanted it to be a homey and simple accompaniment for an assortment of main dishes.

Although we had devised a technique for make-ahead mashed potatoes that involved baking the potatoes and then mashing them, we figured we could forgo this step since we were making a casserole. Betting that we could, we started out with our classic mashed potato recipe, which calls for boiling whole potatoes in their skins until tender, then peeling and mashing them. This somewhat fussy technique yields great flavor and a silky texture in fresh mashed potatoes, but these qualities become less noticeable when the potatoes are incorporated into a cheesy casserole. To make the cooking and mashing method easier, we began peeling the potatoes before cooking. Cutting the raw, peeled potatoes into chunks makes them cook faster, but we found that slicing the raw potatoes ensured that they cooked both quickly and evenly.