

CRISPY POTATO LATKES

For truly crisp latkes, we had to eliminate one thing potatoes are loaded with.

Latkes come in all shapes and sizes. But the goal is always the same: delicate and light potato cakes with a creamy, buttery-soft interior surrounded by a shatteringly crisp outer shell. Unfortunately, many recipes produce latkes that are greasy, gluey, or tough. I was determined to produce a crispy latke with real contrast between the crust and the center.

Most latke recipes consist of the same core elements and a simple formula: Combine raw potatoes and onions and toss them with beaten egg, starch, salt, and pepper. Shallow-fry mounds of the thick batter until the disks are crisp and golden brown. Trouble is, raw potatoes exude tons of moisture when their cells break down, and excess water is the enemy of crispness. More moisture leads to a wetter interior, and water that seeps out of the pancake during frying drags down the temperature of the oil for soggy, greasier results. That meant both the variety of potato and how I processed it would greatly affect my latkes' texture.

A side-by-side test of several types of potato settled the first question: Russets, with their high concentration of moisture-absorbing starch, produced the driest and crispiest pancakes. As for the cutting method, shredded (versus ground or chopped) potatoes yielded superior texture, the fine threads forming a lacy, weblike matrix.

That said, even floury russets gave up a tremendous amount of water, so I'd still need to get rid of some of their moisture. I mixed the potato shreds with grated onion (a fine pulp gave the latkes good flavor without noticeably affecting the texture) and gave the mixture a few good squeezes. I mixed in a couple of eggs and some potato starch that I drained from the exuded potato liquid, then I fried up another batch. Without all that water, these pancakes were on the right track—they were crispier for sure but also a bit raw-tasting and oily.

The tricky thing was that these two problems presented something of a Catch-22: If I fried the latkes long enough to ensure a fully cooked interior, the crust became too dark. But if I lowered the oil temperature so that they cooked more slowly, they absorbed too much of the oil.

Precooking the potatoes seemed like a good way to solve my problem, but when I blanched the spuds, they turned mushy and bland. Could the microwave do a better job? I placed the shredded, squeezed potatoes in a covered bowl and zapped them for a couple of minutes before

mixing them with the other ingredients. Sure enough, this batch of latkes was the best yet: tender inside and shatteringly crisp outside. And the greasiness? Nowhere to be found.

Wondering if there was more to the microwave than I'd thought, I did some research and uncovered an interesting explanation. A potato's starch granules begin to absorb water at temperatures as low as 137 degrees. Briefly heating the shreds in the microwave causes the starches to corral the water they contain into a gel, preventing it from leaching into the batter and lowering the oil temperature. In other words, the microwave had solved the greasiness problem, too. Latke mission accomplished.

—ANDREW JANJIGIAN, *Cook's Illustrated*

Crispy Potato Latkes

SERVES 4 TO 6

We prefer shredding the potatoes on the large holes of a box grater, but you can also use the large shredding disk of a food processor; cut the potatoes into 2-inch lengths first so you are left with short shreds. Serve with applesauce and sour cream.

- 2 pounds russet potatoes, unpeeled and shredded**
- ½ cup grated onion**
- Salt and pepper**
- 2 large eggs, lightly beaten**
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh parsley**
- Vegetable oil**

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position, place rimmed baking sheet on rack, and heat oven to 200 degrees. Toss potatoes, onion, and 1 teaspoon salt together in bowl. Place half of potato mixture in center of dish towel. Gather ends together and twist tightly to drain as much liquid as possible, reserving liquid in liquid measuring cup. Transfer drained potato mixture to second bowl and repeat process with remaining potato mixture. Set potato liquid aside and let stand so starch settles to bottom, at least 5 minutes.

2. Cover potato mixture and microwave until just warmed through but not hot, 1 to 2 minutes, stirring mixture with fork every 30 seconds. Spread potato mixture evenly on second rimmed baking sheet and let cool for 10 minutes. Don't wash out bowl.

3. Pour off water from reserved potato liquid, leaving potato starch in measuring cup.



Briefly microwaving the potato shreds before frying is the key to grease-free latkes.

Add eggs to potato starch and stir until smooth. Return cooled potato mixture to bowl. Add parsley, ¼ teaspoon pepper, and potato starch mixture and toss until evenly combined.

4. Set wire rack in clean rimmed baking sheet and line wire rack with triple layer of paper towels. Add oil to 12-inch skillet until it measures ¼ inch deep and heat over medium-high heat until shimmering but not smoking and oil registers 350 degrees. Place ¼-cup mound of potato mixture in oil and press with nonstick spatula into ½-inch-thick disk. Repeat until 5 latkes are in pan. Cook, adjusting heat so fat bubbles around latke edges, until golden brown on bottom, about 3 minutes. Turn and continue cooking until golden brown on second side, about 3 minutes longer. Drain on paper towels, then transfer to baking sheet in oven. Repeat with remaining potato mixture, adding oil to maintain ¼-inch depth and returning oil to 350 degrees between batches. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately.

TO MAKE AHEAD: Cooled latkes can be covered loosely with plastic wrap and held at room temperature for up to 4 hours. Alternatively, they can be frozen on baking sheet until firm, transferred to zipper-lock bag, and frozen for up to 1 month. Reheat latkes in 375-degree oven until crisp and hot, 3 minutes per side for room-temperature latkes and 6 minutes per side for frozen latkes.