

New potatoes braised in butter



When potatoes are first dug in late spring or early summer, they have a higher proportion of moisture than they do later after months of storage. They also have thinner skins, and some people find that they have more sugar content. They certainly taste fresher than storage potatoes because, well, they are. This sort of freshly-dug potato is called a “new” potato. Some people assume all small potatoes are new potatoes or that new potatoes must be small. But it’s not a question of size. Really, it’s hard to know if a supermarket potato is freshly dug, whatever a label says. To really get new potatoes, you probably have to grow them or buy directly from a farmer. Luckily, even if you use stored potatoes in this recipe they’ll still be delicious. Using new potatoes is ideal, though not essential.

If you do have access to truly freshly-dug potatoes, this is one of the best ways to prepare them. We grow a small amount of potatoes in our greenhouses for an extra-early crop, usually ready by mid-April. For me, this preparation is like a ritual welcoming spring. But whatever time of year you make it, with potatoes new or old, it will be delicious.

12 ounces new potatoes
1 stick (110 grams) butter

½ lightly packed cup parsley
Parmigiano-reggiano for garnish

1. Bring a pasta pot full of water to a gentle boil and preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
2. While the water is heating, carefully wash the potatoes if they’re dirty, especially if you have real new potatoes with thin skins. The thin, delicate skin should be left on if possible..
3. Cut the potatoes into roughly half-ounce pieces and boil in the water for 10 minutes until half cooked.
4. Drain the potatoes in a colander and allow the steam to fully evaporate for 5 minutes.
5. When ready to proceed, melt the butter in a large 12-inch sauté pan, raise the heat to medium high, and add the potatoes, cut side down. When they have sizzled for a minute or two, transfer to the lower third of the oven, and bake for 30 minutes.
6. After 30 minutes, return the potatoes to the stovetop over medium heat. Check to see if a beautiful brown crust has formed on the bottom. If not, continue to brown on the stovetop.
7. When the one side is beautifully browned, add the parsley and toss everything gently in the pan. Taste for salt. Often the butter is enough if you’ve used salted butter. If not, add a modest bit more, along with several grindings of black pepper.
8. Transfer to individual plates and serve at once, garnishing with a light dusting of parmigiano.



In advance

The potatoes can be boiled up to several hours in advance. Once the steam has evaporated, lightly dress them with olive oil to help prevent oxidation and cover them with plastic.

Meatballs braised with tomatoes



When I close my eyes, I can just imagine a perfect meatball. It is characterized by an exquisite crispness, followed by a moist interior, rich and flavorful but still fresh-tasting and, above all, meltingly soft. Unfortunately, when I open my eyes and return to reality, the elusive vision dissipates.

I adore meatballs, and they are indeed one of my favorite foods. But no dish more often disappoints me than meatballs. Even in Italy they can be dense, oily, overly homogeneous, and anything but fresh. In the US it's even worse. How so many meatballs come to have such a spongy, off-putting character I'll never know.

Coming close to the dream is possible, even if we never quite reach it. Dan Richer of *Razza Pizza Artigianale* makes beautiful meatballs, and his own cooking life was changed by meatballs he had in Parma. His insight — that the use of soaked bread in the meatball creates a contrast not unlike the negative space in a black and white photo — is an essential one.

Here are the most critical things to keep in mind when chasing the dream. First, use rich meat with plenty of fat. Second, use plenty of real soaked bread, not finely ground bread crumbs. Third, do not overwork the mixture or aim for homogeneity. It is contrasting textures that create the primary interest in a meatball.

Following these principles will result in an excellent meatball, even if we're never quite satisfied. It's chasing the unattainable that keeps life interesting and keeps us working hard.

2 cups milks and/or buttermilk	½ cup cup parmigiano
100 grams quality bread	1 Tablespoon olive oil
1 pound ground beef	Tiny grating of nutmeg
1 egg	Bread crumbs
¼ cup finely diced onion	Oil or lard for frying
¼ cup chopped parsley	Additional parsley and parmigiano for garnish

1. Begin by soaking the bread in milk to cover (about 2 cups). Depending on the freshness of the bread, it might need only a minute or up to five minutes of soaking time.
2. When the bread is nice and soft, squeeze out the extra milk by hand and in a separate bowl combine the soaked bread with the ground meat, egg, onion, parsley, parmigiano, olive oil, salt, freshly ground pepper, and nutmeg. I mix by fork or by hand, being gentle so as not to overwork the mixture. It should hold together, but individual ingredients should be visible.
3. Gently shape the meatballs, using about 2 tablespoons for small, appetizer-sized meatballs or more (maybe up to ¼ cup per meatball) for a larger size for the *secondo* course.

4. Roll each meatball in fine breadcrumbs (I do a few at a time) and set aside.
5. When ready to proceed, prepare a pot with at least 3 or 4 inches of lard or oil for deep frying, place 1 cup of passata in a large 12-inch sauté pan, and preheat the oven to 425 degrees.
6. When the oil or lard reaches 380 degrees, slip in as many meatballs as will fit without crowding. They should sizzle immediately and with some vigor.
7. Regulate the heat carefully, possibly moving the pot from the heat if necessary so that the meatballs cook at a steady but not excessive speed, browning evenly without burning, about 3 to 5 minutes.
8. Remove the meatballs from the hot oil with a slotted spoon or Chinese spider strainer, and place them in the pan with the *passata*, repeating with the remaining meatballs.
9. When all the meatballs are finished, add about a half cup of water to the pan, bring to a simmer, and place in the oven. Cook for about 15 minutes, until the internal temperature reaches 160 degrees.
10. Serve from the pan with a little bit of the tomato sauce, adding some additional warmed passata for a fresher, cleaner flavor. Garnish with freshly chopped parsley and possibly a little bit of parmigiano.



Notes

Meatballs are more often served as a *secondo* than *antipasto*, but I usually prefer them as a small-plate appetizer.

Usually I use 50/50 combination of beef and pork. If I have it around, I always use a milk/buttermilk mix to soak the bread.

Although I highly recommend deep frying the meatballs, they can also be shallowly fried by using ¼ cup of olive oil in a large 12-inch sauté pan. Brown one side before flipping and doing the other.

In advance

The meatballs can be mixed and shaped well in advance and refrigerated. After frying, they can rest for an hour or two before finishing in the oven.

Celery salad with leeks and chickpeas



At the restaurant Da Fabio in Bologna, there is no menu. Instead, the meal begins with an overwhelming presentation of appetizers — *antipasti* — fifteen or more brought to the table to share. If one can still order more after this, the servers recite the daily offerings of *primi* and *secondi*. The meal is capped off with another overwhelming presentation of desserts. Once, when I was dining at Da Fabio alone, a server dropped off an entire canister of just-made custard gelato at my table. On the same night, I asked for a glass of Lambrusco and received a whole bottle. If one is looking to understand the sense of abundance that characterizes Bologna, one need only dine at Da Fabio.

Among all the treasures served during the course of the evening, the stand-out was one of the most humble, almost comically humble. It was a little salad with celery and parmigiano. That's it. But the quality of the ingredients was so high and the dressing of the salad so perfect, it is the dish that my clients and I remember most vividly from the evening.

Although the recipe here is a little more complex, its inspiration come from the celery salad at Da Fabio. It takes a few ingredients of high quality and assembles them in a modest but memorable and delicious way.

375 grams cooked chickpeas	50 grams chopped celery, including leaves
50 grams sliced leeks	50 grams olive oil
1 heaping tablespoon lemon juice	Crushed, dried red pepper
½ cup freshly chopped parsley	

1. Begin by warming the chickpeas slightly by simmering in water, and then drain. If the leeks are at all gritty, soak in water for 10 minutes or more before draining.
2. Toss all the ingredients together in a bowl, seasoning with about ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon crushed, dried hot pepper, and several grindings of black pepper. Taste and correct for salt and hot pepper.
3. Garnish with a christening of olive oil and serve.



In advance

The salad can be tossed several hours before serving, though I prefer to keep it out of the refrigerator.

Butternut squash soup



When I teach this dish, invariably one of the responses is, “How can something so simple be so good?” I’m both encouraged and a bit disheartened by the statement. On one hand, the soup has made my point: good cooking can be (and usually is) “so simple”. On the other hand, it’s sad that we’ve become so alienated from the kitchen that we don’t already know this essential truth.

Simple indeed. This soup consists of squash, onions, olive oil, butter, broth, and milk/cream. There are plenty of winter squash soups with more complex ingredients, but none I think that can surpass this one in flavor.

I recommend using butternut squash for this soup, but any winter squash is suitable. I prefer butternut because it is so easy to prepare. The skin can be removed with a peeler instead of a knife. Many people would cook the squash until tender and then remove the tough skin, but then the squash wouldn’t have a chance to luxuriate for almost an hour in a lovely coating of olive oil, salt, and raw sugar. It makes a difference.

About 3 pounds butternut squash	2 to 3 cups vegetable broth
2 tablespoons raw sugar	1½ cups milk, cream, and/or buttermilk
8 ounces sweet onion, sliced thin	Fresh sage leaves

Olive oil and butter for cooking

1. Using a sharp vegetable peeler, remove the skin of the squash and scoop out the seeds from the cavity, leaving as much of the fibrous material as possible. You might think to remove this rough-looking material, but take a quick smell of it and you’ll be amazed by the intensity of its aroma. It’s the most flavorful part of the squash.
2. Cut the squash into cubes of about 2 inches, ending up with a total of 2 pounds.
3. Toss the cubes with olive oil, salt, and raw sugar, and bake in the oven at around 375 for an hour, until the squash is very tender but browned.
4. While the squash is baking, in a large sauté pan slowly cook 8 ounces of sweet onion, sliced thin, in about 4 tablespoons of butter. Start with a brisk heat but quickly reduce to medium low so that the onion concentrates and takes on a little color very gradually in about 15 to 30 minutes. This concentration of flavor is very important for the resulting soup.
5. When the squash is tender, transfer it along with any juices in the baking dish to the sauté pan with the onion. Raise the heat to medium and cook for a few minutes, combining the squash and onions well.
6. Add 2 cups of broth to deglaze the pan, then transfer all the contents to a blender and process until completely smooth and velvety but still very thick. I start with 2 cups of broth and add more if necessary.

7. Return the soup to the heat and add the milk, cream, and/or buttermilk. Gently increase the temperature until the soup is about 170 degrees.
8. While the soup is warming, melt a tablespoon or two of butter in a small pan and add some sage leaves, at least 1 for every bowl you plan to serve. Once the sage starts to sizzle, remove from the heat a few minutes and then return to the heat and bring to a sizzle again. If all goes well, the sage will now be delightfully crisped.
9. Portion the soup into bowls and garnish with a crisped sage leaf.



Notes

I use equal parts - 1/2 cup of each - milk, cream, and buttermilk.

I always use vegetable broth for vegetable soups, though experimenting with chicken broth would not be a foolish thing to do!

In advance

The soup can be made several hours in advance, up to point where the cream is added.

Apple custard tart



We think of French and Italian cuisines as quite incompatible. In general they are, but there are areas of overlap. This tart is often identified as French (Tarte Normande), but versions of it are made in Italy as well.

This tart employs not a flaky pie crust (*pâté brisée* in French) but a crumbly crust (*pâté sucrée* in French), which is called *pasta frolla* in Italian. Whereas the flaky pie crust relies on cold butter to create layers of flakiness, *pasta frolla* uses softened butter to create a cookie-like texture. Both have an important place in Italian cooking, but *pasta frolla* is both more common and easier for beginners.

For the crust

1 stick (110 grams) softened butter
65 grams sugar
1 egg yolk
150 grams flour, preferably pastry
½ teaspoon vanilla extract
½ teaspoon salt

For the filling

One pound apples
1 egg
66 grams sugar
30 grams flour
1 teaspoon vanilla
½ cup (110 grams) heavy cream

1. Begin by making the crust, either by hand or in a food processor or stand mixer. Cut the butter into pieces and cream with the sugar, either by hand or machine.
2. Add the egg yolk, salt, and vanilla, and mix thoroughly before adding most of the flour, holding a little bit out in case it's not needed. If working by machine, stop just when the dough comes together.
3. Transfer the dough to a kneading board and gently add the additional flour if it can take it. Instead of kneading with my hands, I like to begin by gently pressing down on the dough with a dough scraper before folding it over and repeating several times to give it some strength. It is the same technique I use in making pasta dough. Then I pick up the dough and use my hands to squeeze the dough to develop just enough strength and structure and a homogeneous texture. Many cooks emphasize the dangers of overworking the dough (which are real) but the dough can be underworked as well. Aim for the dough to look and feel homogeneous and solid. The feel of the dough should be moist and tacky but not at all sticky.
4. The dough can be wrapped in plastic and placed in the refrigerator for an hour or so if necessary, during which time it will firm up and fully absorb the flour. Many cooks find this step essential. But I also have success rolling it out immediately without ill effects, at least if the kitchen's not too hot in summer.
5. In either case, roll the dough until it is 10 inches in diameter, and a little under ¼ inch thick. If you get tears or rips, fear not, as you can easily patch it together again in the pan without any harm done. Gently transfer it to a tart pan and refrigerate for several hours. Better yet, I prefer to completely freeze it before proceeding.

6. When ready to proceed, preheat the oven to 375 degrees and begin making the filling by slicing the apples into half moons about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. Usually I don't even bother peeling the apples, though peeling them would undoubtedly be more elegant.
7. Take the tart pan out of the refrigerator or freezer, and place the apples on the crust in elegant, slightly overlapping concentric circles.
8. Bake in the oven for 20 minutes. Every oven is different, but I place mine in the bottom third to help cook the bottom of the tart.
9. While the crust is baking, mix an egg and 66 grams sugar with a whisk until well-combined. Add 30 grams of flour, the vanilla, and a tiny bit of salt and mix thoroughly. Add the cream gradually, whisking all the while.
10. After 20 minutes, remove the crust from the oven and pour the custard mixture over top. There should be just enough, or perhaps a tiny bit left over.
11. Carefully return the tart to the oven (this time on the center rack) and continue to bake until beautifully brown, about 20 to 30 minutes more.
12. Allow to cool to room temperature before serving. If you'd like it warm, it's better to cool and then gently reheat.
13. Garnish with a generous amount of confectioners' sugar.



Notes

Many recipes simply refer to “softened” butter, but this is vague and unhelpful. You want butter which is malleable but not without body. For me, butter at about 65 degrees is right. In winter, leaving it out for hours or overnight is just fine. But in the summer, you need to be much more careful. 80-degree butter is not right for making this tart.

There is no need to use unsalted butter in baking, as some would have you think. But keep in mind that one stick of salted butter generally contains about $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt.

Pastry flour (like Italian flour generally) is milled more finely than all-purpose flour, and as a result you can use slightly more of it without creating too stiff a dough.

In advance

The crust can be frozen for up to several days before proceeding.