

March Mashness

Many years ago my husband, Greg, and I decided to splurge and have an elaborate lunch in Paris at Joël Robuchon's Michelin three-starred restaurant, Jamin. (Several years after we ate there he closed the restaurant and retired, albeit, briefly.) I can still visualize the beautiful room, the elegant banquettes, the very stylish older couple sitting at the table next to us, and their long-haired dachshund occupying the space on the banquette between the tables (this was France, after all). They were already seated when we arrived, the pooch comfortably curled up in his seat, relaxed, as if he dined here often. We sat next to them. I smiled at the couple, patted the dog, and settled in for a memorable, astonishing meal that lasted almost four hours.

We ordered the tasting menu—each course delivered under a polished silver dome, served on exquisite white wide-rimmed plates and shallow bowls. Joël Robuchon had a legendary potato dish called, "*Purée de Pommes de Terre*." In the simplest sense this was mashed potatoes! But in the hands of a culinary genius, humble potatoes and butter became extraordinary: a heavenly, decadent combination consisting of equal parts potato and butter. Think about it—one pound of potatoes to one pound of butter!

From everything we had read in anticipation of the meal, we expected the *Purée de Pommes de Terre* to be served as one of the courses, celebrated all on its own. At some point during the meal we came to the disappointing realization that the dish would not be served with the tasting menu we had selected. Hesitantly, I requested a sampling of the potatoes a la carte, feeling a bit like the Charles Dickens's character, Tiny Tim, quietly begging for a bit more porridge, except I was begging in French. I simply could not leave the restaurant without a serving.

Perhaps my droopy, puppy-dog-face matched that of the pooch sitting next to me. Our waiter smiled and happily obliged, delivering this special course of puréed potatoes in a shallow, white porcelain bowl under the cover of a silver dome, for extra pomp and circumstance. Ah, those puréed potatoes, cooked, passed through a food mill, cold butter added and then hot milk, whisked and then finally passed through a drum sieve to achieve the smoothest, silkiest consistency that a potato can have—so elegant, so refined.

My featured recipe and video this week is for mashed potatoes. No, not Joël Robuchon's decadent recipe, but what I consider home-style mashed potato perfection. I learned a clever technique from food scientist Shirley Corriher, author of *Cookwise and Bakewise*, that I now consistently use. Rather than melting butter and milk together and then adding it to the cooked mashed potatoes, I add the butter first. This allows the fat to absorb into the cells of the potato, giving the potatoes a more buttery flavor. The milk thins and flavors the potatoes, making them creamy and rich!

While russets are the classic choice for mashed potatoes, consider other options—purple, red-skinned, Yukon Gold, white-skinned—there are about 100 edible potato varieties to choose from. So what makes the best mash? It all depends on the quality that you are looking for in your finished potatoes. Starchy potatoes, such as russets, are most commonly used in home kitchens because of their affordability and availability. Their low moisture content yields a light and fluffy mashed potato, perfect to soak up gravy. Boiling potatoes, such as Yukon Gold, red- or white-skinned, or German butterball potatoes are excellent when puréed, yielding a silky, sweeter texture due to their low starch content. The buttery flavor of these varieties is often preferred by restaurant chefs.

Robuchon's mashed potatoes are to die for—truly! My recipe is a straightforward classic—a valuable recipe and solid technique to add to your kitchen repertoire. My beloved dog, Qerbie, a Belgian Bouvier des Flandres, loved them. But, trust me, at 90 pounds she never sat on a banquette.

-Diane Morgan