

The food that binds: the potato

By: Helen Walsh

"You'll be doing Thanksgiving this year," came the Scottish brogue from the other end of my telephone. "And you'll be doing it on Sunday. About 6pm. I'll be at Bouchercon all day."

My mother, aka Jessica, aka "Jessie the Body Ventura" (or so my nephews nicknamed her after the wrestling superstar), published her first mystery novel last year at age 66 to the great pride of my sisters and I. She'll be up to her ears in murder, mayhem and book signings all Thanksgiving weekend. Hence the Hail Mary pass to me for the turkey and trimmings.

I am the product of what folks used to call a mixed marriage – my mother is a Scottish Presbyterian and my father is an Irish Catholic. The two groups have clashed on many matters political and social over millennium, but they do have at least one cultural touchstone where they can find common ground – the supremacy of the mighty potato! Attached are some of our favourite family recipes.

Colcannon

(Mashed Potatoes with Cabbage)

4 large russet (baking) potatoes
6 cups thinly sliced cabbage
1 cup milk, scalded (at least 2% and preferably homogenized)
4 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into bits and softened
Salt and Pepper to taste

Peel the potatoes and cut them into 1-inch pieces. In a saucepan cover the potatoes with salted water and simmer them, covered, for 15 minutes, or until they are tender. While the potatoes are simmering, in a steamer set over boiling water steam the cabbage for 5 minutes, or until it is tender. Drain the potatoes in a colander, force them through a ricer or the medium disk of a food mill into a bowl, and stir in the milk, the butter, the cabbage, and salt and pepper to taste.



Serves 4-6

PS – My mother doesn't like foreign objects (i.e. roasted garlic) in her mashed potatoes, but I do. If you like, roast a head of garlic in the oven or toaster oven...leave the garlic head intact but peel away the thin papery outer layer, rub with a little olive oil and bake at 450 for about 20 minutes or until soft. Let cool; cut off the tops of the heads and then squeeze out. If adding to Colcannon or regular mashed potatoes, add with the milk and butter.

Pan Fried Potatoes with Rosemary

4 baking potatoes, thinly sliced
1 onion, thinly sliced
2-3 tablespoons butter
2-3 tablespoons olive oil
Half bunch of fresh rosemary chopped (about a 1/4 cup) or 3 tsp dried
Salt and Pepper

Peel and slice potatoes very thinly. Slice onion. Melt butter and olive oil over medium heat in a cast iron or good non-stick skillet. Add one layer potato, sprinkle with rosemary, add another layer potato, sprinkle with rosemary and then add onion again. Drizzle with a little additional olive oil. (It's okay if the pan seems crowded as the potatoes will reduce as they cook). Some people cover at this point but I do not. Cook, turning over and rearranging pan for about 20-30 minutes until they are well browned. You may need to add a little more olive oil as necessary.

Serves 4-6.

Scalloped Potatoes

3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
2 cups chicken broth (or half chicken stock and half whipping cream)
1 1/2 cups coarsely grated extra-sharp Cheddar cheese (can use goat cheese or blue cheese instead)
2 pounds boiling potatoes
1/3 cup dried bread crumbs

Preheat oven to 350°F. and butter a 2-quart shallow baking dish.

In a heavy saucepan melt butter over moderately low heat and whisk in flour. Cook roux, whisking, 3 minutes and add broth in a stream, whisking. Bring sauce to a boil, whisking, and simmer, whisking, until thickened, about 2 minutes. Remove pan from heat and whisk in cheese and salt and pepper to taste, whisking until cheese is melted.

Peel potatoes and slice about 1/8 inch thick. In prepared baking dish make 5 layers each of potatoes and sauce, beginning with potatoes and ending with sauce. Scalloped potatoes may be prepared up to this point 2 hours ahead and kept covered.

Sprinkle with bread crumbs, bake, uncovered, in oven 1 hour, or until potatoes are tender and top is golden.

Serves 4 to 6.