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A Potato is (Not) a Potato

You may have noticed that sometimes your mashed potatoes come out light and fluffy, and sometimes they resemble glue. Or maybe sometimes the potato salad is the best, and sometimes it turns into mush. The problem was not your cooking. It depended on the kind of potato.

There are basically two types of potatoes when it comes to cooking. Some are called 'waxy' and some are called 'mealy' or 'floury'. The differences show up when the potato is cooked, and depend on the kind of starch they have. A great meal can be spoiled by the wrong potato.

Waxy potatoes stick together when they are cooked. They become dense, thick and moist. Most common red- and white-skinned potatoes sold in the US are waxy types. A true 'new potato' is also a waxy. These are the kind you want for potato salad or scalloped potatoes. They will hold their shape even when mixed into mayonnaise or cheese sauce. They don't absorb as much butter or sauce. If you try to mash or puree them, they are likely to turn gluey unless you beat and beat and beat them.

Mealy or floury potatoes on the other hand fall apart when they are cooked. These are russet potatoes, as well as the blue, purple and other newer varieties. A boiled russet, mixed with mayonnaise, turns to mush. But a russet beaten with butter turns easily into a creamy, soft mound with much less work.

Both kinds react to cold temperatures by turning their starch into sugar. You might be able to notice a slightly sweeter taste, but you will surely notice that they will turn brown or almost burn very rapidly if you try to fry them. Sugars brown and burn

much faster than starches do. So if you are planning to fry potatoes, don't store them in the refrigerator.

While the different types do have different amounts of starch, don't worry too much about the glycemic index. That's different if you bake, boil, fry or mash them. It also varies according to the time of day when you eat them. But either baking or boiling is better than frying, since a potato is essentially fat free. If you must have fries or a chip, eat just a few. The fat's the bigger problem.

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