

Pommes Anna

With only two main ingredients, butter and potatoes, pommes Anna is a minimalist triumph of French technique. It is also one of the more challenging potato dishes to prepare, and a true glory to any cook who makes it correctly.



WHY MASTER IT?

CRISP, GOLDEN FRITES, creamy-centered gratins, ethereal mashed potatoes — the French do beautiful things with potatoes. And of all the magnificent potato dishes they cook, **pommes Anna** is a classic, one that deserves more acclaim beyond France.

A buttery cake composed of paper-thin slices of potato, **pommes Anna** is similar to potato gratin in the way it is layered and baked. But unlike a gratin, which is lightly browned on top and creamy soft all the way through, **pommes Anna** emerges from the oven with a tender, slippery interior and a crunchy golden crust. It is a gorgeous contrast in textures.

To make it, the potatoes are trimmed into cylinders (to ensure a neat and attractive shape), sliced and then layered into a skillet sizzling with clarified butter. The potatoes are first cooked on top of the stove, to sear and brown them on the bottom, then moved to the oven to bake until the slices in the center turn soft. After baking, the pan is inverted onto a platter and presented as a stunning, burnished cake of crunchy potato petals.

You can dress up the basic recipe with an array of aromatics, cheeses and other vegetables. (Here, we've added an optional touch of garlic for a sweetly pungent contrast to the mild potatoes.) But **pommes Anna** doesn't need it. The simple flavor of potato and butter is always a comfort, but the interplay of crisp and soft in this dish elevates it to another plane.



CLARIFIED BUTTER

A BRIEF HISTORY

POMMES ANNA WAS CREATED in the mid-19th century by the chef Adolphe Dugléré at Café Anglais in Paris. It was most likely named after Anna Deslions, one of the café's grandes cocottes, who is said to have entertained princes and other dignitaries in a salon above the dining room.

It's telling that the dish was named for a glamorous courtesan. At that time, the potato still had a somewhat shady reputation among the French, having been considered poisonous for centuries

after its introduction to Europe. It seemed delectable, yet just a little bit dangerous.

Potatoes arrived in France in the 16th century via the Spanish, who encountered them in what is now Colombia. The combination of the Northern French climate and the varieties of potato that were imported produced watery tubers, considered unfit for human consumption and even believed to cause leprosy.

This began to change in the late 18th century

through the efforts of Antoine-Augustin Parmentier, an army officer who developed a taste for potatoes in a jail in Hamburg. Once he returned to France, Parmentier persuaded King Louis XVI to embrace the potato, both as a delicacy for the court when dressed up with cream and butter, and as food for the poor when made into soups and gruels.

Potato preparations flourished, and they soon became a necessary accompaniment to roasts, stews and sautéed dishes across the French canon.



"HARVESTING POTATOES DURING THE FLOOD OF THE RHINE IN 1852" BY GUSTAVE BRION (1824-1877).

RMN-GRAND PALAIS/ART RESOURCE, NY

TECHNIQUES AND TIPS

Choosing Ingredients

■ You can use either waxy boiling potatoes or starchy baking potatoes (or a combination of the two), depending on the texture you're after.

Julia Child recommends waxy, low-starch boiling potatoes, such as round white potatoes, red potatoes or Yukon golds. When you use these, the potato slices remain in distinct coins as opposed to merging into a uniform cake. These slippery potato pieces make it harder to cut through the cake neatly after unmolding; it can easily fall apart. But the buttery flavor and satiny texture of the waxy potatoes are marvelous, making up for the precarious presentation.

Russet baking potatoes make for a more compact cake; the starchy slices glue themselves into a disk, one that can be cut into neat wedges. Texturally, the cake will have a crisp exterior with a mashed-potato-like heart. Because of their shape, russets are easier to work with than round potatoes, and you'll have less waste.

■ You can make this dish with regular butter, but it really is worth the few extra minutes to make clarified butter first. It can take the heat longer and at higher temperatures than butter that has not been clarified, so it is less likely to burn. If you don't want to do so, use a combination of oil and regular butter (preferably high-fat, European-style butter). Or use ghee, which is basically clarified butter in which the milk solids have been allowed to brown before being removed. It has a lightly caramelized, nutty flavor.

Trimming the Potatoes And Using a Mandoline

■ You need to cut the potatoes so they are uniform in size, but don't obsess over it. Using a paring knife, remove the ends from each potato, then trim the sides so you get cylinders.

■ If you'd like, skip all the trimming and merely peel the potatoes. You won't get as nice a presentation, but it will save a lot of work.



SLICING ON A MANDOLINE.



SALTING POTATO LAYERS.



UNMOLDING THE DISH.

■ Take extreme care when using a mandoline. The blade is sharp, and your hand is moving quickly; it is easy to slice your finger. It's best to use the protective hand guard or gloves (the mesh gloves for shucking oysters work well).

■ Once you have sliced the potatoes, it is essential to dry them so they don't stick to the pan. To do so, place the

slices between paper towels on a counter and press slightly. Let them sit in the open air, 5 to 10 minutes.

■ Never rinse the potato slices. It removes their starch, which is what helps them bind together into a cake.

Assembling and Baking

■ Don't worry about forming a perfect circle of overlapping potatoes; it will look stunning even if a potato or two is not exactly aligned.

■ Remember what you're looking for: a brown, crisp bottom in the pan. (The cake is flipped out of the pan, so the bottom will become the top.) Be careful that the bottom does not get too dark. You can peek, lifting up the cake slightly with an offset spatula or butter knife. You also want all of the potatoes to be cooked through, but to maintain a bit of texture. The top does not need to be golden as long as the potatoes are cooked through.

■ Unmold the potatoes by running a spatula around the pan rim. Try to get the spatula under the potatoes, too. Once you feel confident the potatoes can unmold, quickly turn the baking dish over onto a large serving platter. Or, if it makes you feel more comfortable, you can put a serving platter on top of the pan, and flip the pan over so the potato cake falls onto the platter. (Use oven mitts; the pan will be hot.) If some potato slices stick, remove them with the spatula and place them on top of the cake.

■ If the dish looks like a disaster, follow Julia Child's advice: Cover the cake with grated Gruyère, Parmesan or Cheddar cheese, dot with another spoonful of butter, then brown for a few seconds under the broiler. The cheese will mask any imperfections.

■ You can make pommes Anna up to 4 hours ahead. After draining the excess butter from the pan and unmolding the cake, flip it back in the pan and cover it. Then place over a very low flame to crisp up and reheat before serving.

Pommes Anna

TIME: 1½ HOURS

YIELD: 6 SERVINGS

- 5½ to 7 pounds russet or all-purpose white potatoes, as needed
- ¾ cup clarified butter, melted
- Fine sea salt, as needed
- Freshly ground black pepper, as needed
- 2 to 4 garlic cloves, sliced paper-thin on a mandoline (optional)

1. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Place a rack in the middle and set a rimmed baking sheet on top of it.
2. Trim potatoes into cylinders, peeling any skin left after trimming. Using a mandoline or sharp knife, slice into ⅛-inch slices and blot dry with paper towels. You should have about 8½ cups.
3. In a heavy 10-inch cast-iron skillet, heat 3 tablespoons clarified butter over medium heat. When hot, carefully place 1 potato slice in the middle, then quickly place more slices around it, overlapping them clockwise to make a ring. Place a second ring to surround the first, going counterclockwise. Continue to the edge of the pan, alternating the direction in which the potato rings overlap. Sprinkle with a generous ¼ teaspoon salt and pepper to taste, then drizzle with another 2 tablespoons butter.
4. Create second layer of potatoes, just as you did the first. Dot a third of the garlic slices, if using, on top of this layer of potatoes. Season with salt and pepper; drizzle with butter.
5. Continue layering potatoes, garlic, butter and salt until everything is used, making a dome of potatoes in the middle (they will sink as they cook). Occasionally shake skillet gently to ensure potatoes aren't sticking. When finished, there should be enough butter that it can be seen bubbling up the sides of the skillet.

6. Butter the bottom of a 9-inch pan and one side of a piece of foil. Push the pan down firmly on top of the potatoes to press them. Remove pan, then cover potatoes with the foil, buttered side down. Cover the foil with a lid. Set skillet on the baking sheet in oven and bake for 20 minutes.

7. Remove skillet from oven, uncover and remove foil, and again press potatoes down firmly with the 9-inch pan. (Rebutter bottom of pan, if necessary, before you press down.) Return to oven and bake uncovered, until potatoes are tender and the sides are dark brown when lifted away from skillet, 20 to 25 minutes.

8. Once more, remove skillet from oven and press potatoes down firmly with pan. Tip the skillet away from you to drain off the excess butter into a bowl (this can be reused for cooking), using the lid to keep the potatoes in place. Run a thin spatula around edge and bottom of skillet to loosen any slices stuck to the pan. Carefully turn out the potatoes onto a serving platter.

Clarified Butter

TIME: 10 MINUTES

YIELD: 12 TABLESPOONS, OR ¾ CUP

- 1 cup unsalted butter (2 sticks)

1. In a small pot, melt butter over low heat until bubbling and foaming subsides. Remove from heat, let cool slightly (don't let butter resolidify), then skim any foam off the top.
2. Line a sieve with cheesecloth or a clean dish towel and place over a heat-safe bowl or container. Leaving the white milk solids at the bottom of the pot, carefully pour or spoon yellow butter fat through the sieve and into the container. Let cool completely before refrigerating for up to 1 month.