

# The Cheesiest Potato Casserole

I used to fight with my brother for extra helpings of the crisp, browned crust on my mother's scalloped potatoes. But no one fights over the scalloped potatoes that I make.

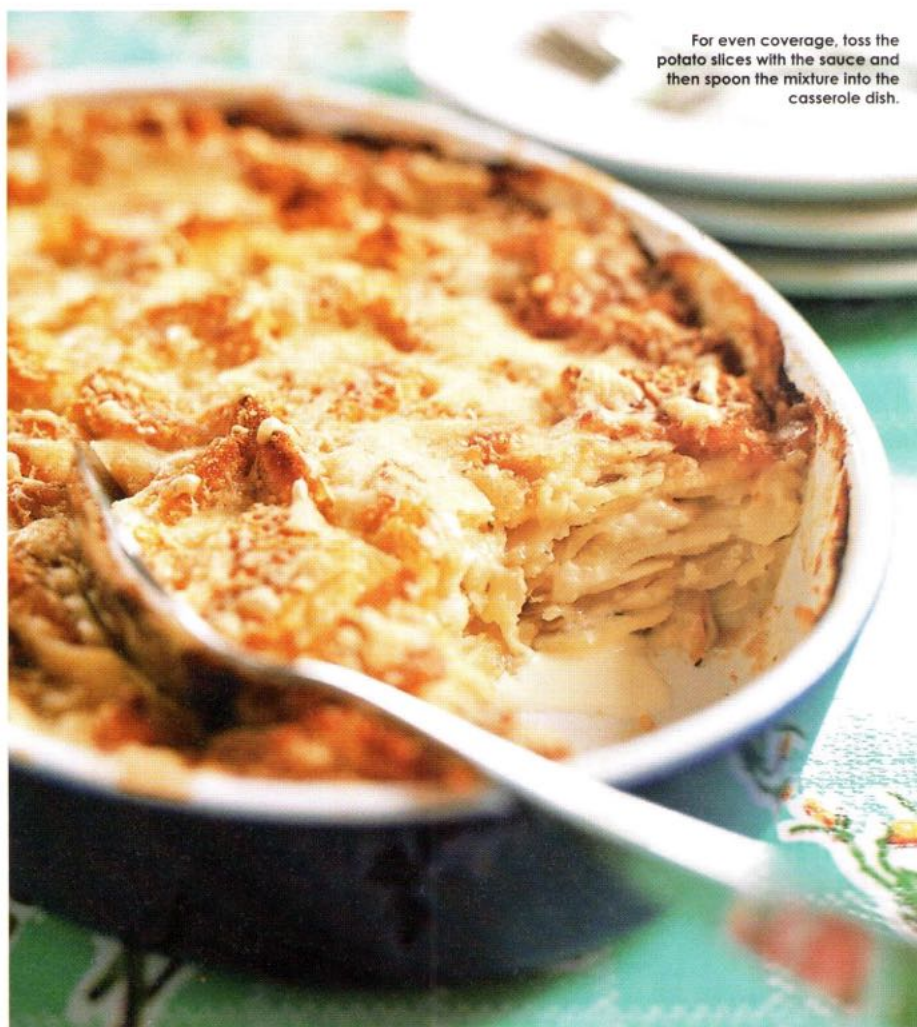
—Debbie Irving, Houlton, Maine

**E**very country cook knows the basic recipe for scalloped potatoes: Layer thinly sliced potatoes and cheese in a shallow casserole dish, cover with liquid, and bake. In the best of all worlds, the potatoes form dense layers, the liquid reduces to a creamy, flavorful sauce, and the cheesy crust is golden and crisp. But scalloped potatoes are often heavy and bland.

Using just cream makes the dish too rich and greasy. But leaner dairy choices can curdle in the oven. My solution was to cut the heavy cream with a little chicken broth. Simmering fresh thyme and garlic with the cream and broth made the sauce taste better. As for the cheese, I decided to pair Gruyère or Swiss (for both their meltability and their flavor) with Parmesan (for its browning ability and its flavor).

Russets, all-purpose, and Yukon Gold potatoes all worked well, although the russets, with their tender bite and earthy flavor, were my favorite. More important than the type of potato used is the way the potatoes are sliced—very thin, if they are to cook evenly. Unless you have excellent knife skills, a mandoline is recommended.

A top layer of golden, bubbly cheese was nice, but I wanted a topping worth fighting for. I remembered a savory bread pudding with crisp bread cubes poking out of the custard. Unconventional as it might seem, a bread topping looked great on my scalloped potatoes, and its tasty crunch kept everyone in the kitchen coming back for more. —Eva Katz



For even coverage, toss the potato slices with the sauce and then spoon the mixture into the casserole dish.

## CHEESY POTATO CASSEROLE

**SERVES 8 TO 10**

We like a hearty sandwich bread for the topping. Arnold Country Classics White was a winner in a recent kitchen testing.

- 4 garlic cloves, 1 clove cut in half lengthwise, remaining cloves minced
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, softened
- 1 cup shredded Gruyère or Swiss cheese
- 1 cup coarsely grated Parmesan cheese
- 1½ cups heavy cream
- 1½ cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme
- 1/8 teaspoon nutmeg
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon pepper
- 2½ pounds russet potatoes (4 to 5 medium), peeled and sliced 1/8 inch thick
- 4–5 slices hearty white sandwich bread, crusts removed and torn into pieces (about 4 cups)

**1.** Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Use cut side of halved garlic to rub sides and bottom of 2-quart shallow baking or gratin dish. Allow garlic in dish to dry briefly, about 2 minutes, then coat dish with softened butter. Combine cheeses in small bowl.

**2.** Bring minced garlic, cream, broth, thyme, nutmeg, salt, and pepper to boil in large saucepan over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until liquid is

reduced to 2½ cups, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and gently stir in potatoes.

**3.** Spoon half of potato mixture into prepared dish. Sprinkle with half of cheese, add remaining potato mixture, and press with spatula to compact. Following photo, press bread pieces into casserole. Bake 40 minutes. Sprinkle remaining cheese on top and continue baking until golden and bubbling, 25 to 30 minutes. Remove from oven and let rest 20 minutes before serving.

## Surprise Topping SANDWICH BREAD



For an extra-crisp crust, press roughly torn pieces of sandwich bread into the casserole right before it goes into the oven.

## Make Ahead

This casserole can be assembled (leave off the bread) and refrigerated up to 24 hours. When ready to bake, add bread topping and bake according to the recipe. If you're cooking for a crowd, double the ingredients and use two baking dishes of similar size.