

Gratin dauphinois

*Creamy or crusty? That is the question. The answer is, both, of course, but in what proportions? Everyone seems to have their own way for making this, perhaps the most classic of potato dishes. And they're almost always delicious; it just depends which kind you prefer. My extensive research and testing (you can't eat too much gratin dauphinois) has followed the **two main schools of thought**, both of which I love, but for different reasons...*



*First up is the '**thin 'n' crispy**' version, as perfected by American food writer **Jeffrey Steingarten**, who points out that 'gratin' comes from 'gratter', to scrape, which hints at the true form and in fact whole point of the dish – it should be really sticky and crispy, requiring much scraping so as not to leave behind a scrap of that wonderful brown goo encrusted on the potatoes and the dish itself. His version is only one layer deep, resulting in much stickiness both above and below. The flavours end up quite concentrated, with salt, pepper, nutmeg, garlic and reduced cream combining into an intense savouriness, not dissimilar to parmesan cheese, despite the absence of cheese in the recipe. In fact, Jeffrey considers the addition of cheese "a gross and pitiful imposture, an admission of failure." I would agree entirely.*

*Equally delicious, just in a different way, is what I call the '**deep 'n' creamy**' version, which chef **Eric Fraudeau** in Paris (with whom I took a class at the start of our culinary travels in 2008) assures me is the correct method. The question of how to correctly and authentically cook a gratin dauphinois was apparently so aggressively contested that Charles de Gaulle held a competition to determine the definitive recipe. Eric is adamant that the potatoes should first be cooked on the stove in milk, which is then discarded, and then baked in cream. Also, the potatoes are cut lengthways, slightly thicker, and arranged in more than one layer. The result is creamier, with the notes of nutmeg et al appearing only as hints. You still get the wonderful crispy crust on top of course, essential to any and every version of the dish.*

Jeffrey's thin 'n' crispy method:

Serves: 6

Total time: 1½ hours

400ml whole milk

1 tsp fine salt

1 tsp ground black pepper



1 tsp grated nutmeg
2 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed
1kg medium waxy-floury potatoes, peeled and thinly sliced cross-wise (2-3mm thick)
85g unsalted butter
150ml double (heavy) cream

1. Place milk, salt, pepper, nutmeg and garlic in a saucepan and slowly bring to a simmer. Turn off heat and set aside to infuse. Heat oven to 180C.
2. Use half the butter to generously grease 2 gratin dishes, preferably made of enamelled cast iron. This recipe should fit into 2 dishes each measuring 8"x8".
3. Lay potato slices in dishes in neatly overlapping rows. Each slice should cover the preceding one by just over half, and each row should cover the preceding one by just under half. Cover the gratin dishes with one layer only.
4. Mix milk to distribute pepper etc and pour over potatoes. It should not quite cover them and you may be worried it's not enough, but don't be tempted to add more milk. Cover tightly with foil and bake in the oven until potatoes are tender when tested with a knife, about 30-40 minutes.
5. When potatoes are done, remove from oven and discard foil. Drizzle over cream, then dot with remaining butter all over. Return to oven and bake again until top is golden brown and crispy, about 20-30 minutes.
6. Let cool slightly before serving. This will make it easier to cut into sections.

Eric's deep 'n' creamy method:

Serves: 6

Total time: 1½ hours

700ml whole milk
1 tsp fine salt
1 tsp ground black pepper
1 tsp grated nutmeg
2 cloves garlic, peeled and smashed
1kg medium waxy-floury potatoes, peeled and sliced length-ways (4-5mm thick)
50g butter
200ml double (heavy) cream



1. Place milk, salt, pepper, nutmeg and garlic in a large saucepan and slowly bring to a boil. Add potatoes, return to boil and then simmer until half-cooked, around 10 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, heat oven to 180C and generously grease an approx. 6"x8" gratin dish with up to half of the butter.

3. Lift potatoes from milk into prepared dish using a slotted spoon. Discard milk, or save for another purpose such as a béchamel sauce. Shake dish to distribute potatoes evenly.
4. Pour cream over potatoes and dot with remaining butter. Bake uncovered until potatoes are tender and a golden crust has formed on top, about 1 hour.
5. Let cool slightly before serving. This will make it easier to cut into sections.