

Pommes Anna

Serves: 4 as a side dish

Preparation time: 15 mins

Cooking time: 45 mins

Ingredients:

50g (2oz) unsalted butter

4 large (or 6 medium) potatoes (neither too waxy nor too starchy; somewhere in between is best)

salt and pepper



Method:

1. Preheat oven to 180C (350F).
2. Melt butter. (To do this dish the truly classic way, clarify it too - ie. skim off the white scum that floats to the surface, and pour off the clarified butter carefully, discarding the watery residue at the bottom.)
3. Peel and slice potatoes crosswise very thinly. Use a mandolin or slicing attachment on a food processor if you have one. Do not soak slices in water as they will lose their starchiness, which is essential for binding them together in this dish. Work quickly so they do not oxidise and discolour.
4. Liberally coat an approx 8" heavy, ovenproof, non-stick frying pan with some of the melted butter. Lay in overlapping potato slices in concentric circles, starting in the centre and working outwards, to cover the base of the pan. Brush/drizzle with more melted butter and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Make another layer of potato slices, brush/drizzle with butter and season again. Repeat layers like this until the pan is full. Brush a piece of foil or parchment paper with butter, lay this on top of the potatoes (buttered side down) and press down firmly all over with your hands to compact the slices and flatten. Weight down with a small, heavy pan or lid.
5. Cook over a medium heat on the stovetop until you hear a good sizzle and the base starts to brown. You can check by carefully lifting up the potatoes with a spatula. Approx 5-10 mins.
6. Transfer to oven and bake until potatoes feel tender when tested with a knife. Approx 40 mins. Remove weight and foil/parchment after 15 mins.
7. Turn the dish out like a cake onto a platter and serve in wedges. (To do this I give the pan a shake, clamp a very large, flat, greased saucepan lid over the top of it, then holding the handle of the lid in one hand and the handle of the frying pan in the other, I quickly flip the whole thing over, then carefully remove the frying pan, and slide the potato cake onto the serving platter.) Some Maldon sea salt sprinkled on top is always good.

I've cooked this classic French dish many times at school and at home and have always been pleased with the results. It's golden brown and crispy on the outside, soft and tender on the inside and goes really well with roast meat or pan-fried steak or duck breast. If you love both roast and mashed potatoes, but are bored of making them all the time, try pommes Anna. You can cook it ahead of time, then reheat and turn out when needed.

To write up this recipe I did some research on its origins. Sadly my namesake did not turn out to be a great poet, painter or princess, but rather a 19th century prostitute. The chef Adolphe Dugl  r   created this dish in honour of Anna Deslions, who was a favoured regular at the restaurant where he worked in Paris, Caf   des Anglais. Anna was rumoured to have provided services to 3 kings, 12 emperors, 18 princes, 34 dukes, 2 princesses and several actresses in the upstairs private dining room. So she may have had a dubious profession, but she did it in style. She was the most loved and respected whore in Paris.

Variations

Escoffier and co would scoff loudly at the idea of making any changes to this classic dish. However, playing around with one or more of these variations works well and makes a nice change once you're bored of plain Anna.

- Make alternating layers of potato and another root vegetable, such as turnip or celeriac. Half the vegetables should remain potato as you need their starch to bind the layers together.
- Sprinkle a little minced garlic and/or grated nutmeg and/or toasted and ground fennel seeds between layers.

Potato facts

- Perhaps Dugl  r   did not choose a potato dish to name after Anna by chance, but because he knew the potato is a member of the nightshade family. This family also includes the deadly *belladonna* plant, so-called because 16th century Italian *bella donnas* ('good-looking women') used atropine, found in the belladonna plant, to dilate the pupils of their eyes so as to appear more seductive.
- In fact, when potatoes were first introduced to Europe from the New World in the 16th century, people were highly wary of them, suspecting them to be poisonous. They were actually right – the leaves and stems of the plant are, being full of solanine. The tubers, of course, are not.
- However, beware the potato that has turned green, been stored in a very cold place, gone wrinkly and spongy, or started to sprout. These are all signs that solanine has developed in it to high levels. The potato probably won't kill you, but might taste bitter and give you a slight tummy ache.
- Adding a potato to an overly salty soup, sauce or stew in order to absorb some of the salt is nothing more than an old wives' tale. The potato just absorbs some of the liquid, and the salt carried in it, hence not affecting the percentage of salt in the remaining liquid one iota.