

Classic Crispy Latkes – Comfort du Jour

Crispy outside, soft and chewy inside. A hint of onion and just enough salt. That's what you want in a classic latke, the delightfully simple, traditional food of Hanukkah. My recipe has evolved, as has my technique. I'm sharing what I've learned in my own journey of learning to make these delicious fried treats—from choosing the right potatoes to knowing how to fry them.

First, the recipe. See my tips and suggestions at the end for more detail. Enjoy!

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds potatoes (I used a combination of russet and Yukon gold)

1 smallish sweet onion

1 egg

2 Tbsp. all-purpose flour

Kosher salt and black pepper

A few shakes ground cumin* (if you are not keeping strict kosher—there's a controversy about this, so please omit the cumin if you are concerned)

Grapeseed oil (or other neutral cooking oil with high smoke point, such as canola)

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Peel and rinse the potatoes. Shred them by whatever means is easiest for you and transfer the shreds immediately to a bowl filled with ice water. Allow them to soak for about 45 minutes.
2. Trim, peel and shred the onion. Use paper towels to wick away the excess moisture from the onions.
3. Beat the egg lightly in a measuring cup. Add the shredded onion and mix to combine evenly. I have found this easier for even mixing of the onion into the potato mixture.
4. Pour enough grapeseed oil into a large skillet or electric frying pan to measure about 1/2" deep. Heat oil to 375° F.
5. Use your hands to carefully scoop the soaked potatoes from the bowl and onto a clean kitchen towel. Try to avoid stirring up the starch from the bottom of the bowl. Spread the potato shreds out over the towel. Roll up the towel and twist to extract as much moisture as possible from the potatoes. Empty the shreds into a large, new bowl.
6. Sprinkle the cumin and flour over the shreds and toss with your hands to evenly distribute.
7. Pour out the water from the soaking bowl, and take it slow enough to keep the powdery white starch in the bottom of the bowl. Scoop the starch into the bowl with the dried potato shreds and toss again with your hands to combine. Finally, add the egg-onion mixture and toss until evenly combined.
8. Form a clump of potato mixture in the palm of your hand, pressing to shape it as best you can into a flattened ball. Do not try to shape it as a disc at this point. Carefully lay the ball of potato mixture into the hot oil and repeat until you have three or four clumps in the oil. When the edges begin to turn golden, use the back of a small spatula to gently flatten the balls of mixture into more of a disc shape. Turn the latkes after all edges (and the bottom) are golden brown. Use two utensils to keep them stable for turning without splashing. Fry the second side until golden. Transfer to a rack over paper toweling and repeat until all latkes are fried. Season the latkes with kosher salt as soon as they come out of the hot oil.

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THE SECRET IS IN THE STARCH

The key to crispy latkes is removing the excess liquid from the shredded potatoes, while simultaneously preserving the starches that aid in holding those shreds together. After you shred the potatoes, which you can do either by hand on a box grater or (the easy way) in a food processor, simply soak them in ice water long enough to draw the starch out of the shreds. Next, squeeze as much moisture as possible out of the shredded potatoes, then reunite them with the sticky starch that has settled at the bottom of the soaking bowl. Add in some shredded onions (also squeezed dry), a beaten egg and a few sprinkles of flour, and you're good to go!

THE MIRACLE OF THE OIL

Frying latkes is the traditional way, and I don't recommend trying to fry them in a thin film of oil as I did in my first couple of years. You may get a nice crispness on the outside, but the inside won't be done. You need about a half-inch of oil in a hot skillet to make a crispy latke, and the type of oil can make a difference as well. As much as I love and rely on unfiltered, extra virgin olive oil for most of my cooking, its smoke point is about the same temperature as you need for frying the latkes, so it is not the best choice. For this kind of frying, I've chosen grapeseed oil, which has a higher smoke point and produces a nice crispy exterior with a neutral flavor.

ENJOY LATKES YOUR OWN WAY

Not all latkes are the crisp-textured, straw-colored wafers that I am sharing today. Some cooks make their latkes with a soft, almost mashed potato-like texture, and those are delicious also. Onions are usually included in the mix for flavor, but I have seen latke recipes that lean toward the sweet side and there are plenty of other vegetables that can be substituted for potatoes, if you don't mind a less-than-traditional treat.

NOT ALL SPUDS ARE CREATED EQUAL

Although it is true that you can use different ingredients to make latkes, it's important to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of certain potatoes. For best results and crispy latkes, choose a starchy potato, such as russet or Yukon gold. Potatoes that are described as "waxy," such as red potatoes, are higher in moisture and lower in starch. That isn't to say you can't use them, but you would need to give extra attention to the step of moisture reduction and supplement the starch a bit to hold them together. Also, be prepared for a slightly less crispy latke when using waxy potatoes, or any other substitute that doesn't measure up in the starch department.

WHAT TO SERVE WITH LATKES

Traditionally, latkes are served with sour cream and (preferably homemade) applesauce. If you are serving them as part of a meal, they are terrific with slow-cooked brisket or roast chicken.