

young men of the town find the library a real boon to them, and use it freely in their efforts after self-improvement.

Before we leave, the librarian calls our attention to a very heavy item in the financial statement included in the report. Although the total income from the rates is less than £250 a year, nearly £50 have to be expended in binding, an outlay largely attributable to the carelessness with which books are used both in the Reference Library and at the homes of borrowers. Cases of wilful damage are believed to be exceedingly

rare; but comparatively few of those for whose special benefit Free Libraries are designed seem yet to have learned to appreciate books as they ought. Probably this evil will to a large extent be remedied as time rolls on. Meanwhile it is interesting to stand in the crowded lobby and watch the eagerness with which the visitors swarm round the window, through which three assistants are engaged issuing books as fast as they can possibly be entered, till the closing hour of nine brings a welcome and much-needed end to the labours of the day.

FREDERIC WAGSTAFF.

1882

## HOW TO COOK POTATOES.

BY A. G. PAYNE, AUTHOR OF "COMMON-SENSE COOKERY."



HERE is generally a great deal of truth in old proverbs, and the one that says that "it requires a good cook to cook a steak and boil a potato," is no exception to the rule. The various methods of cooking potatoes are almost infinite, but I do not think I am guilty of exaggeration in saying that by far the most

difficult method of all is to boil a potato—*properly*. At the present season of the year, the roast beef of Old England, red and juicy, has special claims upon us all; though with the progress of time Old England has to a great extent given way to the importations of America and even Australia. Still it is good genuine beef; and I think those who regard us as barbarians for eating potatoes with our meat, would do well to consider what would our Christmas sirloin be without its constant companion, the white, floury potato, white as snow, firm, and yet one that crumbles to pieces when touched even lightly with a fork, for he indeed would be worse than barbarian that attempted to *cut* a potato.

Comparisons are, as a rule, best avoided; but the French have so much in their favour in everything that relates to cookery, that we may for one moment contrast the *filet de bœuf aux pommes de terre frites*, with the old-fashioned English rump-steak and floury potato. Both are good, and I will try and give both their due. First the French fillet. Beautifully tender, but then there is a suspicion that some of the goodness, and even flavour, has been knocked out of it, still for tender teeth this is undoubtedly a great point in its favour. On the top is a small pat of half-melted butter, like rich cream, to which some chopped parsley has been added, and which gives a sort of finish to the dish, while round the fillet repose those light brown slices of potato, which require so much caution in eating, owing to the cook having mastered the art of frying—viz., heating the fat far above the temperature of boiling water. It is a dish by no means to be despised, and after a long journey abroad is the safest one to order.

Now for our own rump-steak. Cooked to a turn on

a gridiron, and placed on a plate scorching hot. The steak coloured outside like a freshly-polished old dark Spanish mahogany table. Attached to the steak is a rim of rich yellow fat, at least an inch and a half thick, just slightly browned here and there; for steak, my French friend, is worth nothing without fat, and how often do you bear this in mind? Is there one thing left to make the English steak win the day? Even while we wait, a streak of bright, clear, red gravy runs out upon the plate, soon to be absorbed by the floury potatoes that complete the picture; and if the steak be tender, and a deep red when cut—not blue—and the appetite good, no better meal in my opinion can be found, however far we may travel from home.

Is it possible to describe how to get a potato into this state of perfection? I admit it is a very difficult thing to do, the more so as potatoes now undoubtedly are not what they were many years ago.

First, then, how about boiling the potatoes in their jackets? If you consult cookery books on this subject you will be overwhelmed with arguments, medical and scientific, and which seem also common-sense arguments. The latter, by-the-by, does not always follow from the former. I bow meekly to these arguments, as I should were one to argue in favour of corduroy *versus* cloth; I admit the corduroy to be more durable, more economical, admirably warm for winter wear, &c., but for all that I don't buy any. If some of our great men brought corduroy into fashion, I would readily follow. We are to a great extent bound to study fashion, as beyond a certain point we should be put down as eccentric. I believe that potatoes are best cooked in their skins; I cannot recommend the method on the ground of appearance.

Old potatoes should be put into cold water, and new potatoes into boiling water; and just as it is impossible to say at what precise moment a potato ceases to be new and becomes old, so it is equally impossible to say what temperature the water should be between these two extremes for potatoes that are neither new nor old.

It is impossible to give an exact receipt for boiling potatoes, as time and temperature vary with the size and age. It is, however, quite possible to explain the

"principles" on which boiling depends. Cooks too often fail because they treat all potatoes alike, whereas if they knew the reason *why* they do what they do, they would then understand how to vary their method according to circumstances.

First let us take ordinary large potatoes—though, remember, it does not follow that the *very* large ones are the best. First, in peeling them it is obvious that on economic grounds the peel should be cut as thin as possible—besides which, one argument in favour of cooking potatoes in their jackets is that the part nearest the peel contains the greatest nourishment. Next after peeling, the eyes, *i.e.* those black spots, must be cut out with as little waste as possible. Directly the potatoes are peeled they should be thrown into cold water till they are wanted. Next the potatoes should be placed in a saucepan with enough cold water to cover them, to which has been added salt in the proportion of about a dessert-spoonful to a quart. Now the reason *why* little new potatoes should be thrown into boiling water, and large ones into cold, is that the larger they are the more slowly should they be boiled. Were you to throw large potatoes into boiling water and to continue boiling, the result would be that the outside part of the potato would melt while the inside would be quite hard. When you throw the potatoes into cold water and set the saucepan on the fire, the water, of course, warms gradually, and the potatoes get hot through equally gradually. When the water comes to the boil, they should be allowed to boil gently till the potato is tender right through, and this is found out by sticking them with a fork.

I think that the secret of cooking potatoes properly is to pour off the water directly they are tender to the centre, and never to let them boil beyond. The moment therefore that you find the fork goes through easily, take the saucepan off the fire, pour off the water, and place the saucepan by the side of the fire, where the heat is slack; leave the lid half on and place a cloth lightly over the potatoes, under the lid, to absorb the steam. Now and then give the saucepan a shake, a little quick shake; this prevents the potatoes sticking, and also helps to increase the floury appearance.

Very large potatoes take nearly half an hour after the water comes to the boiling point; but to carry out the *principle*, suppose the potatoes are unusually large, then as soon as the water boils throw in some more cold water, say a large cupful, so as to prolong the period in which the potatoes are getting hot through. This is, however, rarely necessary in the present day, as the giants are now seldom to be met with.

Now as the potatoes decrease in size and get gradually smaller and newer, so must the water into which they are put go up gradually from cold to "water with the chill off," next "lukewarm water," "warm water," "hot water," "boiling water." We next have another sliding scale with regard to peeling. New potatoes should be washed and rubbed with a rough cloth or a piece of flannel; when they get a little older, they require scraping; and so we ascend to the peeling, though at what exact point the one ends and the other begins it is, of course, impossible to say.

From what I have already explained, it follows that potatoes cannot be boiled properly unless they are all of one size. The cook, where potatoes are kept in any quantity, should therefore pick out a lot as nearly as possible the same size. When there are only a few, and of different sizes, the large ones must be cut in halves. New potatoes when small should be boiled with a few sprigs of mint, a quarter of an hour is generally enough, and they should be as freshly dug as possible.

New potatoes should be drained and thrown into a cloth for a minute till the steam evaporates, and then placed in a hot vegetable dish with a pat of butter. The heat of the potatoes will soon melt the butter, and then they can be rolled in it for a few seconds before sending to table.

Another admirable method of cooking potatoes is to steam them; the steamer should fit tight to the saucepan; they can be tested by the fork as to when they are done, and the steamer should be occasionally shaken.

One important point to be borne in mind is not to begin to cook the potatoes too soon—some cooks are so afraid of getting behindhand, that they will have their potatoes done half an hour before they are wanted. If potatoes are kept too long after they are cooked, first, they are not really hot; and secondly, they are very apt to change colour. Indeed, with regard to this point of changing colour, there are some potatoes that seem to turn a bad colour however carefully they may be cooked. The fact is that they are inferior potatoes. Were I to sum up in a few words the secret of boiling a potato properly, I should say—first, find out the moment the potato is done through; secondly, let the water be boiling pretty briskly the last two or three minutes; thirdly, take them off and drain them the moment they are done; fourthly, let the steam evaporate and send them to table at once.

The next point of importance is, What is the best thing to be done with the cold potatoes that are left? Too often they are left and supposed to be warmed up for the servants' supper—but are they? A good first-class man-cook is often glad of some cold potatoes to make a border for an *entrée*. At the present season of the year there are probably some thousands of houses whose larders contain a cold roast turkey and some cold potatoes. Probably the breast has been cut into and the legs remain whole. Try and use the cold potatoes as follows:—First take off the two legs and put them by to be devilled. Then cut up the cold turkey, scrape the meat off the bones, and put the bones on the fire and stew them down with an onion, a little parsley, and some trimmings of celery; skim the grease off, and boil it away till it is reduced to rather more than half a pint; add a tea-spoonful of catchup, a little cayenne pepper, and thicken it with a little corn-flour. Cut up the meat free from bone, and warm it up in this rich strong gravy, in a small stewpan. Then take the cold potatoes, add a little milk boiled separately and some butter, and mash them in a basin with a wooden spoon till all the lumps are gone. Put the mash on to a tin dish and shape it so that it is hollow

in the middle and fluted outside—I recollect using once a broken nutmeg-grater to shape the outside into round pillars—the mould of potatoes thus formed with the hand need not be more than an inch and a half thick; put the tin into the oven and bake it a little while—it need not necessarily be browned—and then fill the inside with the cut-up turkey and rich gravy. This is an admirable *entrée* and there is no waste.

Or another way:—Put the bones of the turkey on as before, to stew down to rather more than a pint. Skim and strain and get rid of the grease; add to it a pint of boiling milk—*boiled separate*. Thicken this delicious white soup with the cold potatoes, passing the whole through a wire sieve. Add a little pepper and salt, and boil a bay-leaf in it for a short time. Serve some fried bread or some crisp toast cut up small.

Another way of using up cold potatoes is to make them into a cheesecake as follows:—Take two lemons, two ounces of sugar or a little more, two eggs, and two ounces of butter. Rub the sugar on the rind of the lemons and pound the sugar with the juice of the two lemons, and the butter and the two eggs well beaten up. Mix in as much cold potatoes as the mixture will bear, and put it in a small buttered pie-dish and bake it in the oven—the mixture before baking should be of the consistency of mortar.

The sole secret of fried potatoes is to have sufficient fat to cover them, and to have this fat hot enough. Cut the potatoes (raw) into slices as thick, say, as a penny; keep them in water till they are wanted; then dry them thoroughly and throw them into fat, heated considerably above boiling water point. Directly they begin to turn colour take them out, as they will get darker after being taken out of the fat.

Cold cooked potatoes may be fried, but they must not be allowed to remain in the fat long. Cut up some cold hard potatoes into pieces half an inch thick, and throw them into the fat till the edges begin to turn colour, then take them out, drain them on a cloth, and put them in a dish with a little butter and some chopped parsley. This is a very nice way of serving potatoes.

Another nice way of using up cold boiled potatoes is to have them *à la maître d'hôtel*. Cut the potatoes—kidney ones are the best—into thin slices, say one-eighth of an inch each, and warm them up in a little white stock thickened with some flour and butter—or some melted butter that has been left may be used—then add a tea-spoonful of finely chopped parsley and a little lemon-juice. Add pepper and salt and serve very hot. Some fried bread may be placed round and is a decided improvement.

Potatoes *au gratin* is another way of using up

cold potatoes. Mix together one egg well beaten up, one ounce of Parmesan cheese, one yolk of an egg, about half an ounce of butter, a little lemon-juice, and a suspicion of nutmeg. Warm this up in a stewpan over the fire without letting it boil, or the egg will cause it to curdle. Then cut the cold potatoes into slices and place a layer on a dish. Spread a little of this mixture over it, and then another layer of potatoes, till you pile up a small pyramid of potatoes. Then smooth the remainder of the mixture over the pyramid, and sprinkle the whole with some very fine bread-crumbs and Parmesan cheese mixed. Put the dish (a tin one is best) in the oven and warm it up—rather more than a quarter of an hour is generally sufficient—and serve. Some fried bread can be placed round the edge by way of garnish. This dish can be served after sweets, like macaroni *au gratin*. Those who are fond of hot things will find cayenne pepper a great improvement to the above.

I had intended to give a number of receipts for cooking potatoes, but I find that using up cold potatoes will more than suffice. When we consider first the number of hungry and even starving poor, who at the present season of the year are shivering around us in misery, and on the other hand the thousands of pounds that are annually wasted over potatoes alone through the indifference and recklessness of servants, and of those over them who should know better, it becomes a duty upon all to save food.

Cold potatoes make an excellent salad, or I should say the basis of an excellent salad. Rub a salad-bowl with an onion, and slice up the cold potatoes and place them in the bowl with some finely chopped parsley. Dress the salad as follows—say enough for six persons:—Take a salt-spoonful of salt and half that quantity of pepper; place them in a table-spoon, fill up with *fresh* Lucca oil, stir it up and pour over the potatoes. Add another table-spoonful of oil, and mix it all lightly together for some time, so that the out-sides of the potato-slices get oily. Then add half a table-spoonful of vinegar and mix again.

I said the basis of a salad, as to this may be added some finely cut celery, sliced boiled beetroot, thin slices of raw bloaters (German fashion), sardines, anchovies, &c., also some hard-boiled eggs. If you want the salad to look pretty, mix in first, say, the potatoes, celery, and beetroot. Smooth over the top and get a couple of hard-boiled eggs. Separate the yolks and whites, powder the first and finely chop the second. Then make alternate streaks on the salad, like a star, of white, yellow, and green—the latter with the chopped parsley. You can, if you like, dress the salad first, so that it will only want mixing before it is served. This makes a capital winter dish.

