

# Enjoy potatoes during Potato Month

EBENSBURG — This is the time of year when menus are planned around good, inexpensive stick-to-the-ribs food. And one of the basic ingredients of such menus is the potato.

February just happens to be Potato Lovers Month, sponsored for the past seven years by the Potato Board. Many retailers are likely to take part in the promotion again this year, so if you see special potato displays, posters, and recipe and nutrition pamphlets in the produce department, you'll know why.

Nationally, growers raised six percent more potatoes than the year before. Some of the increase may have been to cash in on the fast-moving national trend of serving baked potatoes and potato skins in fast-food and full-service eateries.

The supply situation is a little different closer to home. Here in Pennsylvania, growers harvested the same number of acres as last year, but because of favorable growing conditions the supply ended up 20 percent greater than a year ago. Because of the more favorable dollar exchange rate, another problem that growers in the Northeast face is the intense competition from Canadian potato imports. There are many opportunities for retailers to put potatoes on special in the weeks ahead.

The grading system for potatoes leaves most consumers mystified. Pennsylvania law requires that

pre-packaged potatoes display a U.S. quality grade. The most common grade is U.S. No. 1, while the premium grade is called U.S. Extra No. 1. Lesser grades include U.S. Commercial and U.S. No. 2, which are not generally available in retail stores. If the potatoes cannot meet the standards for any of these grades, then they must be marked Unclassified.

The U.S. No 1 grade consists of potatoes of similar varietal characteristics that are firm, fairly clean, fairly well shaped, and generally free from damage. Since potatoes are grown by nature, not all potatoes are perfect. Potatoes are graded by humans, who are known to make mistakes. Sometimes potatoes with defects or damage do get by graders, so the U.S. No. 1 grade makes allowances. A total of eight percent of the potatoes, in a representative sample of a lot or load, may have defects. A cut or bruise requiring more than five percent waste to cut out would be considered a defect.

The variation in the size of potatoes within a bag can also upset consumers. Grading for size is not mandatory, except that they must be at least one and seven-eighths inches in diameter. There is no maximum size specified.

Among the more than 30 billion pounds of potatoes that will find their way to market in one form or another this year, more than two-thirds will be the Russet Burbank. About one-fourth will be varieties

of round whites and less than five percent will be round reds.

Consumers are likely to think of russet potatoes as Idahos, since almost all Idahos are Russet Burbanks. However, not all Russet Burbanks are grown in Idaho. Russet potatoes are long and cylindrical, sometimes oblong. They have shallow eyes and heavily netted skins. They're ideal for baking. The russet's high-starch, low-moisture content makes it mealy and more dry than moist inside. It's that mealy-dryness that makes for fluffy lightness.

Here are some fine points from the Idaho Potato Commission to get the best-baked potato. They say, "spare the-foil or spoil the potato." The much too prevalent custom of wrapping a potato in aluminum foil ruins the potato's texture because it steams rather than bakes. The moisture is retained rather than driven out, leaving a soft wrinkled skin instead of the desired crisp skin. If you want the skin a little softer, rub a little salad oil (some say bacon grease) on the outside of the potato before baking.

The next step involves pricking the potato with a fork a few times. Three on the top and three on the bottom is enough. This allows the steam to escape and prevents the

potato from exploding. It will also make for a drier, mealier texture to ensure fluffiness in the perfect baked potato.

To test the potato for doneness, put on an insulated mitt and pinch it. If it feels soft, it's done. You can also check the inside with a fork.

The Commission suggests another step, which is called the crisscross-pinch technique. As soon as the potato is baked to the soft-to-the-touch stage, take it from the oven and cut an "X" in the top with a fork. Idaho experts

would never dream of opening a baked potato with anything but a fork, held lightly in the hand to avoid tamping down the fluffy, delicate interior.

Then they push some of the potato through the top with slight pressure of the fingers on the peel so that some of the snowy inside shows. This will help the fluffing process by releasing steam.

The potato is now ready to accept just about any topping you can think of.

## Fisher named Blair Co. extension agent

HOLIDAYSBURG — Beth E. Fisher has been named home economist and assistant extension agent in Blair County, W. Wayne Hinish, associate dean and associate director of the Cooperative Extension Service, announced earlier this month.

Fisher is responsible for the adult and youth program development, volunteer recruitment and training, and family living education in Blair County.

"Generally, I'll be responsible for all home economics and 4-H programs in the county," Fisher says.

Originally from Dover, Pa. she earned a bachelor's degree in 1977 and a master's degree in 1982, both in education, from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She worked with Penn State's Cooperative Extension Service in York as an Extension assistant from 1977 to 1979.

Fisher also worked as a salesclerk in Zolinger's Department Store in York, as a teacher in the North Star School District in Boswell, and as a teller for the National Bank of Commonwealth in Indiana.

She is a member of the Indiana Junior Women's Civic Club.

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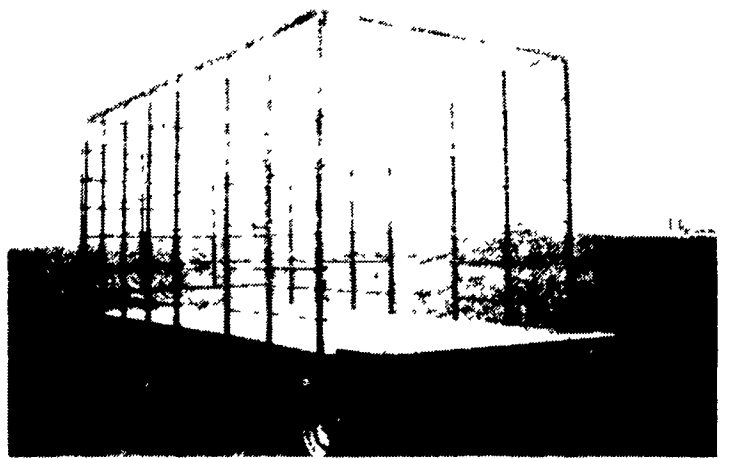
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