

# Potato Pancakes, and More

Root vegetables and legumes make delicious savory cakes

BY CLEM NILAN

**W**hen my mother made potato pancakes to use up leftovers, my family was ecstatic to see her set a platter of these golden-brown beauties and a bottle of ketchup in front of us. Now that I cook for myself, I forgo the ketchup—but I still love all kinds of savory cakes.

A savory cake is a mixture of root vegetables or legumes that is loosely bound, formed into a small, flat cake, and sautéed. While I offer several recipes for savory cakes, you can probably create your own after a trip to the market or even a scavenger hunt through the refrigerator. Leftovers like cooked beans, lentils, and baked or boiled potatoes can easily be turned into a delicious side dish or a light supper.

## SEASONING THE SAVORY CAKE

The key to good savory cakes lies in the seasoning. The choice of herbs and spices is a free-for-all (fresh herbs really shine), but adding aromatic vegetables such as onions and garlic is a must because they give depth and character to the bland, starchy ingredients that compose savory cakes. While these essential ingredients can be added raw for extra crunch and bite, sautéing releases and tempers their flavors. Other cooked ingredients, such as sautéed diced vegetables, chopped bacon, or toasted pine nuts, can also be used.

To further embellish your savory cakes, there are a number of condiments you might consider. Applesauce or a sweet-tart chutney are classic matches for potato pancakes; salsa would be perfect for a black-bean cake made with coriander, cumin, and chiles; and herbed sour cream would go well with almost any savory cake imaginable.

## GRATED VS. MASHED

My favorite savory cake ingredient is grated raw potatoes. Always grate raw vegetables—especially potatoes—immediately before cooking to avoid discoloration. When air reaches the grated surface of a raw vegetable, the vegetable discolors quickly.



*Savory sweet-potato cake makes the meal. Great as an appetizer, with a few side dishes, it can also be a vegetarian main course.*

Cooked root vegetables, beans, and legumes are also good in savory cakes, but are best mashed to a creamy-chunky consistency. Mashing releases starch and makes the cakes tender enough to cut with a fork. It's also important, however, to include chopped ingredients for contrasting texture.

Starch is the binding element that separates savory cakes from a side dish of plain vegetables or beans. Potatoes and beans have plenty of natural starch, but other root vegetables aren't as starchy. If your cakes don't seem to hold together, try adding a tablespoon of flour or cornstarch for every two cups of vegetables.

Raw potatoes contain starch but also a lot of water; you want to keep one but not the other. To get rid of excess liquid, grate the potatoes into a

**Grated potatoes provide their own starch.** Squeeze the excess liquid from the grated potatoes and let it sit until the starch separates from the liquid. Throw out the liquid, but not the starch; add it back into the potatoes for binder.



colander that's set inside a large bowl. Push down on the potatoes to squeeze out excess liquid. After a few minutes, the liquid in the bowl will separate, and a starchy sediment will settle at the bottom. Carefully pour off the liquid and incorporate the starch back into the potatoes.

Sometimes starch alone isn't enough to hold cakes together, and that's where eggs come in. These act as a form of culinary glue, with the white as the binding element. The high-fat yolk supplies richness and flavor, but you can omit it with no loss of binding capability.

### COOKING CAKES

Savory cakes are most easily handled when shaped into round patties about three inches in diameter and half an inch thick. These are sturdy enough to turn without difficulty and thin enough to allow the outside to brown and the inside to warm in the same amount of time.

Oil-generous frying is the traditional—and the best—method for cooking savory cakes. Potato

**Shaping savory cakes is child's play.** Here, roasted sweet potatoes are mixed with corn, red peppers, and fresh herbs. The mashed potato contains plenty of starch, so there's no need to add eggs or flour to hold the ingredients together.



Photos except where noted: Dana Harris

pancakes fried in a quarter inch of hot oil are a fulfilling treat, but for less indulgent occasions I find that cooking savory cakes with just enough oil to thoroughly cover the pan's surface is a good compromise. Use a heavy pan (it gives better heat distribution) that has a level and unblemished surface; an uneven or rough surface encourages sticking. I don't advise cooking savory cakes in a dry, nonstick pan because the cakes tend to burn. No matter how you cook your cakes, serve them quickly. They can be held in a warm oven up to 30 minutes after cooking, but they're best served immediately.

### POTATO CAKES

Other root vegetables, such as celery root, parsnips, or carrots, may replace up to a third of the potatoes in this recipe. *Yields about a dozen 3-inch cakes.*

**1½ lb. red potatoes, scrubbed and grated**  
**1 medium onion, grated**  
**1 tsp. salt**  
**½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper**  
**Vegetable oil**

Put the grated potatoes in a colander that's set inside a bowl. Press on the potatoes to squeeze out the excess water. Let the liquid stand for a few minutes; the starch will settle at the bottom of the bowl. Pour off the liquid and add the grated potatoes to the potato starch. Add the onion, salt, and pepper, and mix well.

Heat ¼ in. of oil in a sauté pan until the oil is very hot and then reduce the heat to medium high. Scoop out ½ cup (packed) batter, press it firmly with your hands to form a cake, and carefully slip it in the oil. Don't crowd the pan or the temperature will drop and the cakes will absorb the fat. Fry until golden brown, about 2 to 3 min. on each side, turning once.

### ITALIAN WHITE-BEAN CAKES

These cakes make a wonderful accompaniment to grilled meat or fish. *Yields six to eight 3-inch cakes.*

**8 oz. dried cannellini beans, soaked overnight and drained**  
**1 Tbs. olive oil**  
**½ medium onion, diced**  
**1 clove garlic, minced**  
**2 Tbs. minced parsley**  
**¾ tsp. minced fresh sage (or a pinch dried)**  
**¾ tsp. salt**  
**¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper**  
**¼ cup flour**  
**3 Tbs. vegetable oil**

Cook the beans in 4 cups water until tender, about an hour. Remove 1 cup of beans from the pot, chop them coarse, and set aside. Continue cooking the remaining beans until they're very soft. Drain and purée the soft beans; set aside.

Heat the olive oil in a sauté pan over medium heat. Sauté the onion and garlic until translucent. Add the parsley, sage, salt, and pepper. Mix this with the puréed and chopped beans; taste for seasoning. Chill the mixture at least 1 hour.



*Frying potato pancakes means incomparable flavor. The hot oil adds a crunch that's worth the extra calories.*

Put the flour in a shallow pie pan. Flour your hands well. With a ⅓-cup measure, scoop out the bean mixture and, with your hands, shape a 3-in. cake about ½ in. thick. Set the bean cake in the pie pan and dust thoroughly with flour, tapping off excess. Set aside until all the cakes are shaped.

Heat the vegetable oil in a heavy, nonstick pan over medium-high heat and add the cakes without crowding the pan. Cook for about 4 min. and then turn and continue cooking for another 5 min., or until golden brown.

### SWEET-POTATO CAKES

This recipe varies from the basic potato pancake by using sweet potatoes that have been mashed for a creamier texture. *Yields six 3-inch cakes.*

**2 lb. sweet potatoes, roasted, flesh scooped out**  
**⅓ cup diced red bell pepper**  
**⅓ cup fresh, frozen, or well-drained canned corn kernels**  
**2 Tbs. minced parsley**  
**¼ cup minced chives**  
**1 tsp. salt**  
**½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper**  
**Vegetable oil**

Cook the sweet potato flesh in a saucepan over medium heat, stirring, for 2 to 3 min. to reduce moisture. The potatoes still will feel somewhat tacky.

In a bowl, combine the potatoes with the red pepper, corn, parsley, chives, salt, and pepper. Taste and adjust the seasonings. With your hands, shape the mixture into 3-in. cakes about ½ in. thick.

Heat ¼ in. of oil in a sauté pan until the oil is very hot and then reduce the heat to medium high. Slip in the cakes but don't crowd the pan, or the temperature will drop and the cakes will absorb the fat. Cook until golden brown, 1 to 1½ min. on each side.

---

*For ten years, Clem Nilan owned and operated The Daily Planet, a restaurant in Burlington, Vermont. He is now an instructor at the New England Culinary Institute in Essex, Vermont. ♦*