

Choosing the right potato for your recipe.

Potatoes are composed mostly of starch and water. The starch is in the form of granules, which in turn are contained in starch cells. The higher the starch content of the potato, the fuller the cells. Choosing the right potato for the job is tantamount to a dish's success. The fact that dozens of potato varieties are grown in this country makes the question of which potato is best for a specific recipe even more confusing, not to mention that some potatoes are sold by varietal name (such as Red Bliss or Yukon Gold), others by generic name (all-purpose, baking, etc.).

To make sense of this confusion, it is helpful to group potatoes into three major categories based on their ratio of solids (mostly starch) to water. The categories are high-starch/low-moisture potatoes, medium-starch potatoes, and low-starch/high-moisture potatoes. In high-starch potatoes, the cells are completely full—they look like plump little beach balls. In medium-starch and low-starch potatoes, the cells are more like underinflated beach balls. The space between these less-than-full cells is taken up mostly by water.

High-Starch/Low-Moisture Potatoes

Earthy flavored russets and Idahos are the best choice for fluffy French fries, roasted potatoes, and archetypical creamy mashed potatoes. They, however, lose their shape when simmered in soups or stews. Because they have so little moisture, they tend to soak up liquid as they cook and eventually implode. In some cases, as when you want the potatoes to thicken a soup, this can be desirable.

Medium-Starch Potatoes

Buttery Yukon Golds, Yellow Finns, Purple Peruvians, and all-purpose potatoes do a better job of holding their shape but share many traits in common with high-starch potatoes.

Low-Starch/High-Moisture Potatoes

Sometimes called boiling or "waxy" potatoes, this variety holds their shape better than other potatoes when simmered. This category includes all red-skinned potatoes, such as Red Bliss and Red Creamer, as well as freshly dug potatoes, which are often labeled "new" potatoes. Low-starch potatoes should be selected when potatoes are to hold their shape, like in a soup or salad. That being said, the test kitchen can favor russets for a particular salad because of their unique ability to absorb the flavorings; see All-American Potato Salad.