

If you're like most, this spud's for you

■ *Lots of ways to enjoy country's favorite veggie*

February is National Potato Lover's Month, which is pretty good timing considering the results of a new national poll revealing that Americans do love their spuds.

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Any way you slice, dice, mash or fry it, potatoes remain America's favorite vegetable (a categorical stretch, in my opinion) according to what I'm sure is a very impartial and unbiased study by the Idaho Potato Commission.

But nonetheless, 26 percent of American picked potatoes over corn at 19 percent, broccoli at 17 percent and tomatoes just a tad behind at 16 percent. And how do we most savor our spuds? Mashed potatoes reign supreme at 28 percent, followed by baked potatoes (25 percent), French fries (20 percent), home fries/hash browns (10 percent) and potato chips (5 percent).

The poor potato became much maligned after the no-carb, low-carb diet frenzy of recent years, but the folks in Idaho would like to remind you that each 5.3-ounce spud has only 110 calories and zero fat and cholesterol, but 45 percent of your daily value of vitamin C and nearly two times as much potassium as a banana, plus fiber and vitamin B6. And at only 25 cents per serving, they say, potatoes can be good for your wallet and waistline.

I, too, pushed potatoes from my plate during a painful — but effective — South Beach phase several years back, but have gradually let them back

into the fold. I still largely avoid baked or any plain potatoes, but do indulge in mashed or scalloped when they're whipped with something interesting like rosemary and garlic, caramelized onions or sauteed mushrooms, or mixed with any manner of cheeses and cream. There's no amount of sit-ups that will keep me from those carbs.

Potatoes are also great in a proper roast, French-fried crisp and salty alongside a juicy hamburger, or shredded and skillet-fried with peppers and onions. Come to think of it, those crunchy salt-and-vinegar kettle chips are pretty righteous. And creamy potato soup rocks.

OK, guess that puts me in the majority after all. I do dig potatoes.

Speaking of vegetables, Barack Obama has officially gone on record as saying how much he hates beets.

Finally, a leader I can believe in!

My disdain for the foulest of all root vegetables has also been well documented, yet my dissing never prompted a national marketing campaign in retaliation. But get yourself elected president and suddenly your food likes and dislikes become more important than those of the rest of us.

After Obama's revelation, the online recipe portal FoodieView quickly jumped to the lowly beet's defense, touting its one-stop access to the Internet's "largest and highest quality" collection of beet recipes — 20,250 to be exact.

Largest? No doubt. (God forbid there could be more.)

Highest quality? Clearly subjective.

■ Beet Carpaccio with Goat

Cheese and Mint Vinaigrette — No, thank you.

■ Beet Ravioli with Poppy Seed Butter — Disgusting.

■ Beet Bundt Cake — Under no circumstances.

■ ■ ■ An extra helping

A great thing to drizzle over baked or roasted potatoes is olive oil. But to best maintain flavor and healthy antioxidants, you might want to consider buying it in tin containers. Exposure to light can cause oil to oxidize, says the American Oil Chemists Society, and that could compromise olive oil's best properties.

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Chorizo and Fingerling Potatoes

12 fingerling potatoes (any combination of gold, red or purple)
1 lb. chorizo sausage
2 poblano peppers, medium dice
1 red onion, medium dice
1 cup garlic oil (recipe below)
salt a pepper, to taste

1. Carefully blanch potatoes over medium heat (so as not to crack skins) until tender. Drain, cool and slice on a bias.
2. Roast chorizo with peppers and onion at 350 degrees for 10-15 minutes. Let cool and slice chorizo on a bias (crosswise at a 45-degree angle).
3. Toss with garlic oil and salt and pepper to taste. Serve at room temperature.

Garlic Oil

1 cup olive oil
1 cup whole garlic, peeled

1. Place olive oil and garlic in a saucepan and cook on medium heat until just starting to simmer.
2. Remove from heat and cool in pan. Strain oil into a squeeze bottle to use as needed.