

POTATO LATKES

Potato pancakes are the traditional dish of Chanukah, the holiday that commemorates the recapture and rededication of the Temple by the Jewish military leader Judas Maccabaeus in 165 B.C. Since there were no potatoes available to any Jewish cook until the Spanish Conquest of Peru, some 1700 years later, it is definitely the oil that connects these tasty pancakes to Chanukah. They supplement the ritual of candlelighting which directly re-creates the miracle of the light in the Temple that would not fail during the eight days of crisis. The actual preparation of latkes is a matter of sophistication, debate, and—for the cook—devotion. Latkes take time and can't be made in advance. Disconnect any smoke alarms before heating the oil to fry them.

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6 large Idaho potatoes, 8 to 9 ounces each,
peeled
3 medium onions, peeled
4 eggs, lightly beaten to combine whites and
yolks
1/4 to 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
2 to 3 tablespoons salt
Freshly ground black pepper
Peanut oil for frying

Grate the potatoes using the largest holes on a 4-sided grater or, if using a processor, dice first and then process with the steel blade in spurts, to prevent producing a gluey purée. With each potato, grate or process half an onion.

Transfer the grated potatoes and onions to a sieve placed over a large bowl. Press out the excess moisture with a wooden spoon and transfer the vegetables to another bowl. Pour off all of the liquid from the first bowl, leaving behind the potato starch that settles at the bottom; add the starch to the grated potatoes and onions.

Beat the eggs into the potato-onion mixture. Then beat in just enough flour to make a light batter. Add salt and pepper.

Heat 1/4 inch of oil in a large heavy skillet. For each pancake, drop about 2 tablespoons of batter into the oil and flatten with the back of a wooden spoon; the flatter you make the pancakes, the crisper they will be. Some people prefer thicker pancakes with a soft interior. Fry for about 2 minutes on one side, then turn and fry for 30 seconds or so on the other side. Don't crowd the pan with too many pancakes, or else they will become soggy. Remove the finished pancakes with a spatula, drain them over the skillet, and place on paper towels. Keep the drained pancakes warm in a 200-degree oven while you fry the rest. Serve as soon as possible, with sour cream and/or applesauce (see page 126). Makes about 40 3- to 4-inch latkes.

Latkes. Some like them small and crisp, as here; others batten militantly on big, more potato-y pancakes.