

The secret of a perfect roast potato? Not a lot of people know that (but Michael Caine does) By [Rose Prince](#)

Nigella crisps hers in duck fat, Delia prefers lard. Jamie Oliver 'chuffs' his up in a pan with lemon and rosemary, while Heston Blumenthal insists on using a rare Scottish spud.



A consensus, it seems, has yet to be reached on how to make the ultimate roast potato. But stand aside, celebrity chefs. For not a lot of people know that the person who serves the best roast potatoes is Michael Caine.

Interviewed on Desert Island Discs on Sunday, the actor proudly boasted that his Christmas versions are the finest of all. And after testing his method yesterday, I have to agree.

So what's his secret? Caine swears by soaking parboiled potatoes in cold extra virgin olive oil before cooking, allowing the fat to be absorbed deep into the spuds' flesh.

He then pops them onto a baking tray and into a hot oven for an hour and, low and behold, they emerge with a honeycomb coating that is deep, crisp and even.

But if you think that cooking up the perfect roasties is just a matter of following these few, brief guidelines, think again. There's much more to potato perfection than that . . .

Perfect recipe: Actor Michael Caine

THE RIGHT TYPE OF POTATO

For the classic British roast potato, you need a 'floury' spud. These are the main crop, autumn-harvested varieties.

Best known is Maris Piper, sold in every supermarket and known as a good all-rounder. But if you really want to push the boat out, look north to the ancient Scottish varieties, which were originally developed for boiling and eating with butter.

Lucy Carroll, who grows rare breed potatoes on her Northumberland farm, says the blue-skinned Arran Victory is the king of roasties, a claim backed up by forensic chef Heston Blumenthal. Bred in 1918 on the Scottish Isle of Arran and named to celebrate the end of World War I, Arran Victory's inner flesh is snowy white and has a strong, distinctive taste. Its natural dryness also guarantees crispness. If boiled unpeeled, its skin loses its blue colour. Other good varieties include the sweet-flavoured Dunbar Rover; British Queen with its traditional deep eyes, King Edwards (red and white), and the red Duke of York.

New or waxy potatoes can be roasted, but will never develop a lastingly crisp skin.

THE RIGHT PREPARATION

Always peel the potatoes, digging out any eyes or blemishes. Leaving the peel on the potato might add negligible amounts to its nourishment value, but, frankly, do we care? It's Christmas - and well-being is far from our minds.

Fibre is what muesli is for and, besides; the skins actually contain no more vitamins and minerals than the flesh.

Cut the peeled potatoes into halves, put into a pan of cold water and bring to the boil. Add 1/2 tsp of salt to the water. Salt speeds the crumbling of cells, making the potato a fraction crunchier.



The right roasties: Choose a 'floury' potato to cook and always peel them first

Some cooks, including Jamie Oliver, add lemon or garlic cloves to the water, but aside from messing with the true flavour, this seems like just another (tedious) attempt to Mediterranean-ise a British favourite.

Parboil the potatoes for seven minutes if the halves are large, five minutes if small.

Drain into a colander and leave to steam - and dry out - for a few minutes. You are now ready for the next stage.

THE RIGHT SURFACE

To achieve crunchiness during roasting, roughen the edges of the parboiled potatoes by shaking the colander in a circular motion.

Some cooks, such as Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall and Constance Spry, suggest using a fork to scrape the surface of each potato. But provided they have not been over-boiled and are not too soft, the colander shake is both easier and quicker.

My mother always dusted her potatoes with a little white flour to ensure they stayed crisp once out of the oven.

Nigella Lawson sprinkles them with semolina. If you use the right type of floury potatoes, however, adding flour shouldn't be necessary.

THE RIGHT FAT



Crisp and tasty: Michael Caine soaks his boiled potatoes in cold olive oil before roasting

Every cook has a different view on the fat issue. If you want to follow Michael Caine's lead, put 1cm of cold extra virgin olive oil into the pan and add the parboiled potatoes. He also adds a few rosemary and sage leaves.

'Marinating' them in the cold oil allows the fat to be absorbed into their fuzzy surface and makes a thicker crust.

But good results are also possible with other fats. Duck or goose fat, with its high smoking point (the point at which the oil burns), produces rich potatoes that stay crisp long after roasting.

Pork lard and beef dripping give spuds a distinct, old-fashioned flavour.

But avoid shortening or refined fats such as sunflower or vegetable oil. Aside from being less healthy - they contain high levels of trans fats - they are also deodorised and add nothing to the flavour of your potatoes.

THE RIGHT WAY TO ROAST

The right heat is crucial. The Caine cold oil method, where the potatoes are put in unheated oil, flies in the face of most recipes.

Most experts, including Delia Smith, recommend putting the oil into the roasting pan and heating it before you put in the potatoes.

Delia recommends 220C/425C/gas 7). But most fats spoil at more than 200C/400F/gas 6), and a longer roast at a lower heat (190C/375F/gas 5) will produce an evenly-coloured, golden roast potato with a thicker crust and no burnt bits.

Either way, put the pan on the upper shelf of the oven. Depending on the make and potency of your oven - and this must be taken into account - the potatoes should take approximately one hour to cook.

Once done, lift them out with a slotted spoon and keep warm in a serving dish. Do not leave the potatoes sitting in the cooking fat.

They will now stay crisp for at least 20 minutes, giving you enough time to carve.