

Tenpenny Nail Baked Potato

What's the best way to bake a potato? You could just swaddle it in aluminum foil and throw it in the oven. You'd end up with an edible cooked potato, but you won't get crusty skin, the airy interior; or the hot puff of steam that rises so invitingly when you cut into a proper baked potato. No, for that you need the oven and a piece of equipment you will find at a hardware store: a tenpenny nail. The oven crisps the potato skin; the nail conducts the heat to the center of the spud, accelerating the cooking time. So here's the basic version, with a glorious bacony, cheesy loaded potato version to follow. Serves 1; can be multiplied as desired

Shop Start with a proper baking potato, like an organic russet or Idaho. True bakers are large and elongated with a rough brown skin.

Gear Your basic kitchen gear plus a vegetable brush and a stainless steel tenpenny nail (about 3 inches long)

What else I call for using the oven here, but you won't be surprised to learn that I often "bake" my potatoes on the grill. To do this, set up the grill for indirect grilling and preheat it to medium-high (about 400°F). Tossing a handful of soaked oak or hickory wood chips on the coals before you put on the potatoes adds an awesome smoke flavor. The cooking time is the same as for baking the potatoes in an oven.

Time 40 minutes to 1 hour baking time

For the potato

1 large baking potato (12 to 14 ounces)

1 teaspoon melted bacon fat or butter, or 1 teaspoon extra virgin olive oil

Coarse salt (kosher or sea) and freshly ground black pepper

Any or all of the following for serving

Butter

Sour cream

Thinly sliced chives or scallions

Grated cheddar cheese

Crisped slivered bacon (no Fako-Bits, please)

1 Preheat the oven to 400°F.

2 Scrub the potato all over with a vegetable brush. Rinse the potato well and blot it dry with a paper towel. Prick the potato skin 3 or 4 times with a fork. Drive a clean tenpenny nail through the potato into the center. Brush or rub the potato on all sides with the bacon fat, butter, or olive oil and season it generously with salt and pepper. Place the potato on a baking sheet or piece of aluminum foil.

3 Bake the potato until the skin is browned and crisp and the potato is cooked through, 40 minutes to 1 hour. When done the potato should feel soft when you squeeze it between your thumb and forefinger. Or use a skewer or fork to test for doneness; it should pierce the potato easily.

4 To serve, squeeze the sides of the potato between your thumb and forefinger in a few places to soften the flesh. Remove the nail (careful, it will be very hot) and, using a paring knife, make a 1-inch-deep slit along the top of the potato. Squeeze

the ends of the potato to open it up. Spoon in some butter, sour cream, chives or scallions, cheddar cheese, and/or bacon slivers as desired.

Loaded Potatoes

Bacon, cheddar cheese, scallions, and other flavorings turn a simple baked potato (aka stuffer or loaded potato) into a meal. Serves 8 half potatoes

- 4 large baking potatoes (12 to 14 ounces each)
- 4 slices artisanal bacon, cut crosswise into 1/4-inch slivers
- 5 tablespoons butter, at room temperature
- 4 tablespoons finely chopped scallions
- 2 cups (about 8 ounces) coarsely grated white cheddar cheese
- 1/2 cup sour cream
- Coarse salt (kosher or sea) and freshly ground black pepper
- Pimentón (smoked paprika) or sweet paprika, for sprinkling

1 Make the potatoes as described in Tenpenny Nail Baked Potato on page 490. Cut each potato in half lengthwise. Using a spoon, scrape out most of the potato flesh, leaving a 1/4-inch-thick layer next to the potato skin; it's easier to scoop the flesh out of the potatoes when they're warm. Coarsely chop the potato flesh and place it in a mixing bowl.

2 Place the bacon slivers in a cold skillet and cook over medium heat until browned and crisp, 3 to 4 minutes. Using a fork, transfer the bacon to the bowl with the chopped potatoes, setting aside the bacon fat in the skillet for future use. Add 4 tablespoons of the butter, the scallions, and 1 1/2 cups of the cheddar cheese to the chopped potatoes and gently stir to mix. Add the sour cream, stirring the mixture as little as possible so you keep some potato pieces to bite into. Season the potato mixture with salt and pepper to taste; it should be highly seasoned.

3 Stuff the potato mixture back into the potato skins, dividing it evenly among them and mounding it in the center of each potato skin. Sprinkle each potato with some of the remaining cheddar cheese and top each with a thin slice of butter from the remaining 1 tablespoon and a sprinkling of *pimentón*. The stuffed potatoes can be prepared up to 24 hours ahead to this stage and refrigerated, covered.

4 When ready to serve, preheat the oven to 400°F.

5 Place the stuffed potatoes on a baking sheet. Bake the potatoes until they are browned and bubbling, about 15 minutes.