



Karen Dudley

This month, our new heritage food contributor, Karen Dudley of Woodstock's The Kitchen, reveals her true self and a lifelong love affair with this, the most versatile of vegetables...

...the humble potato

When I saw my then soon-to-be mother-in-law's roast potatoes for the first time at a Christmas lunch, I knew that this was a lunch I wanted to be a part of – every year! I quickly understood: those potatoes were a family tradition, as intricately part of Christmas lunch with the Mallinsons as pelicans on Zeekoevlei in the view beyond the table.

My mother-in-law Joan and her sister Barbara made them together. The potatoes were par-boiled and fork-scraped then lightly floured before being patiently fried, a few at a time, in an electric frying pan. They emerged with crispy, deep golden edges – each one perfection! Gammon, turkey, stuffing – it all paled beside these half globes. A little Maldon sea salt, a little gravy – heaven!

To my horror, returning eagerly for seconds, I realised that my soon-to-be family had allocated (they are too nice to use the word rationed) one potato per person! My own mom, for all her culinary gifts, did not have a feeling for potatoes. But with my new family I was at the gates of potato bliss, only to be tormented with a (perfectly decent) ration!

I realised that I would need to reveal myself as a two-potato eater – convention be damned.

Potatoes have always had a way of undoing me, revealing my true self. At the Christmas table, I made my confession. I very much loved my new family, but in future could they please accommodate for a larger portion of potatoes for me? Looking back, I realise that it was a bold but inspired risk. It revealed to my new family something of my true passion and secured me an ample roast potato portion every Christmas at Zeekoevlei!

What is it about this humble vegetable that reveals my greed? Most people have an internal device that says: stop now. Faced with a plate of potato chips, I become territorial, devouring my

own and making sly incursions into the plates of other unsuspecting eaters.

Perhaps my grandmother's homemade potato chips were the first legendary chips. She even had a chip cutter and a deep-frying basket. Homemade chips have a sort of innocence about them, don't you think?

My dad and I have forever shared a quest: to find the best hot chips in Cape Town.

When I was younger, this took the form of an orienteering adventure as we sought out cafés, fish shops, restaurants and road stalls the length and breadth of the Peninsula.

I applied myself with vigour! This was my kind of quest! We debated crispy or *slap*. Purely salted or doused with vinegar. Sitting on benches, rocks or quays, we would lose ourselves in pure *slap* chip enjoyment. To this day, my father still calls me by my nickname, Chip.

In the early eighties, our family toured Europe in a camper van. In Belgium we confronted the stuff of true potato legend: *pommes frites*, usually sold in a cone with a large dollop of extraordinary mayonnaise. We had never tasted anything like this! What was it about these potatoes? Of course, we had to try them in Holland and France too. For us, along with cathedrals, museums and other European sites, a true wonder!

The sheer versatility of potatoes and their capacity to carry flavour belies their apparent 'humble' status. Perhaps there is something in its submission to dressing, butter or oil that reveals its true character.

It is this gentle aspect of potatoes that I love. Potatoes take on dressing like no other vegetable. Vinegary or mayonnaise, they are champions of flavour.

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Fusion potatoes

Here is one of my favourite potato salads. A broken, still warm potato with a surprising dressing: I willingly capitulate every time! It comes from my first book, *A Week In The Kitchen*.

- 1½kg potatoes, unpeeled
- 150ml mayonnaise
- 45ml Chinese wine vinegar
- 5ml sesame oil
- 2 cloves of garlic, crushed
- 30ml wasabi paste (or to taste)
- juice of 1 lemon
- 8 spring onions, sliced
- 6 radishes, finely sliced
- small handful of parsley, thyme or coriander, chopped
- salt and pepper to taste
- 1 medium cucumber, shaved into ribbons with a peeler
- large handful of watercress for garnish

Boil the potatoes in plenty of boiling water until just tender. Drain and leave in the colander until they're cool enough to handle. Mix the mayonnaise, Chinese vinegar, sesame oil, garlic, wasabi and lemon juice. Break the potatoes gently with your fingers into bite-sized pieces. Stir the wasabi mayo mix gently-gently through the still-warm potatoes and arrange on the platter, layering generously with the finely sliced spring onions, radishes and herbs so that all the potatoes get a bit of all the colouring and seasoning. Once all the potatoes have been layered, garnish with the remaining chopped herbs, ribboned cucumber, radish and watercress. 🏠



I have no resistance to a warm potato with this wasabi mayo dressing! And the pink and green radish and cucumber garnish are my favourite colours together.