

The New York Times

03/15/2010 - <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/21/magazine/21food-t-000.html?ref=magazine>

The Cheat: The Upper (and Lower) Crust

By Sam Sifton



At first glance, it is the easiest recipe in the world, a marvel of the Sunday-morning ridiculous: grate potatoes into a pan with butter. Turn them golden brown over medium heat. Serve with eggs, toast, sausage.

Accompany these with good coffee and a long run through the newspaper, and you have a day made whole from its start. That is a good plan to make in the serenity of an early-morning kitchen, anyway. People are sleeping or just stirring, and bright sunlight falls on the corner of a cutting board, on a pile of potatoes, a stick of butter, the ebony perfection of a clean, cast-iron pan. This simple recipe: The novelist William Maxwell's bright center of heaven, as undemanding as grass.



"Through everything flowed the quick immeasurable energy of the morning, yet nothing was disturbed by it," Maxwell wrote of just such a scene. "The room was utterly quiet, utterly self-possessed."

Go ahead and start cooking, though. Watch and smell as those potatoes begin to singe, listen as children pad into the room to call for pancakes or French toast instead, as spouses and in-laws mutter about cholesterol or houseguests smile tight in the smoke as the potatoes continue not to cook, even as they burn. It becomes instantly clear why people stand in line for an hour for brunch at a restaurant: What appears easy often is not.

I puzzled over this for a while, my blackened and raw potatoes, my impotent rage. You go to [Henrietta's Table](#) in Cambridge, Mass., for breakfast, and the hash browns are like something out of a Dutch painting — a still life of breakfast, circa 1650. They are thick and crusted, brown and nutty, with a luscious yellow-white interior, the perfect rejoinder to warm egg yolk, to bacon grease. They make for breakfast perfection at \$4.25, eggs included.

That's all I was looking for, all that I was failing to achieve.

So I called Peter Davis, the chef at Henrietta's, to find out what was the what. He mm-hmmed a little when I told him my scorched woes, then started to speak in a soft New England accent. He laid things out for me as if reading a Robert Lowell poem for the professional kitchen, applicable to the home. "Clarify the butter first," he said.

Butter is a fat: a stick of milk solids bound with emulsified oil, suspending some water. It melts in a pan set over a medium fire, then starts to foam. Eventually, the milk solids begin to brown (making brown-butter sauce, terrific on fish) and then to burn (making burned butter, breakfast's bane).

Thus clarification. "You want to remove those milk solids," Davis said, so that you can heat the butter to a higher temperature without burning, make it hot enough to crisp your potatoes and allow the sugars within them to caramelize, to turn into crust.

Science! It's poetry in motion. To clarify butter, you gently melt a few sticks in a small pot and allow the liquid to foam. Then you skim all the gook from the top and leave all the gook at the bottom, and use what remains as your cooking oil. The process is simple, a trick of the restaurant trade. It results in no great loss of product for the price paid for it, while offering a tremendous increase in taste and satisfaction.

Henrietta's goes through a great deal of clarified butter. The restaurant, located off the ground floor of the Charles Hotel, a few blocks from Harvard Square, cooks something on the order of 200 breakfasts every weekday, Davis said in the interview, and 300 a day on weekends. These are big, serious morning feeds built around hash browns and toast and coffee, fresh eggs and squeezed juices, tureens of maple syrup for the waffles and hotcakes, thick Nueske's bacon on the side.

"It's a meal where you really have to pay attention," Davis said. "You have to take it seriously as a cook, sometimes even as seriously as dinner."

So clarify your butter the day or night before you want to throw down your marker. That way it will be ready for you in bleary first light. Boil your potatoes while you're at it — Yukon Golds, ideally, with their high sugar content — and allow them to dry, whole and ungrated, overnight in the refrigerator. This, too, will leave you prepared to do breakfast battle with the crabby and undercaffeinated alike.

It is the work of perhaps 40 minutes to grate the now-dry-and-cool potatoes, to heat the pan and add to it the butter, to season the potatoes and place them over the heat, to listen and smell (in happiness this time) as the oil crackles against the starches, transforming them into a fragrant crust.

There are two ways to flip hash browns. One is to wriggle a wide spatula beneath them, working it into the center of the pan and then flipping the whole as if it were a giant pancake. Or you can place a plate over the pan, put your hand on it and quickly invert the whole. Then you slide the new bottom, until recently the unfinished top, back into the pan to continue cooking. Whichever method makes you less nervous is the one to use.

Henrietta's Hash Browns

4 medium Yukon Gold potatoes

7 tablespoons unsalted butter

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper.

1. Peel the potatoes and place them in a large pot of cold water. Set over high heat and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium high and cook until you can poke a bamboo skewer through a potato, 40 to 50 minutes, being careful not to overcook. Drain and set aside to cool and dry completely, preferably overnight in the refrigerator.

2. Meanwhile, clarify the butter by melting it in a small saucepan over medium heat. When foam forms, use a spoon to remove and discard it. Cook, skimming, until the butter stops bubbling. Take care not to brown it. Strain through a fine sieve or cheesecloth and reserve. You should have about 5 tablespoons.

3. Heat a cast-iron or heavy-bottomed pan over medium-high heat. Grate the potatoes on the large side of a box grater into a medium bowl. Season with salt and pepper and mix lightly. Add 3 tablespoons butter to pan, swirl until it begins to melt and add the shredded potatoes. Cook until golden brown and crusted on the bottom, almost (but not quite) burned in parts, about 15 minutes.

4. Use a wide spatula to flip the potatoes, or quickly invert the pan onto a dinner plate and gently slide them back into the pan. Add remaining butter around the sides of the potatoes and cook the second side until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Cut into wedges or spoon onto plates. Serve with eggs, grilled meats, toast and plenty of jam. *Serves 6.*

Adapted from Peter Davis at Henrietta's Table, Cambridge, Mass.