

The Latke King

By Joel Silverstein (December 2012)

In many parts of the world, I am known as the “Latke King.” The Kingship began in the early 1960's when my Great Aunt Bessie taught me how to cook Jewish food. Bessie had long stopped running her restaurant in New York City, but still loved to cook every day. Visiting her was always a treat. One of her favorite things to cook was potatoes latkes. She was not wealthy so making the most out of simple inexpensive ingredients was essential. Bessie shared her secret of making the latke and, for almost fifty years, I have been making them for friends and family. Once you learn the method of making these tasty delights, you too can become a “Latke King.”

A latke is a potato pancake. The etymology of its name is by way of the Yiddish language from a Russian and Ukrainian word that best translates as a patch. A little patch of love made from most any food you can pull up from the dirt. The latke is common in many ethnic foods including the Chinese scallion pancake, the Russian blini, and the American hash brown. However, nothing comes close to the delicious flavor and texture of the classic potato latke!

Making a latke is easy and most anyone can do it with a little practice. Start with basic ingredients, a few tools, and a desire to become a Latke King. To get started you will need the following items: Clean workspace, a stovetop, a heavy bottom pan about 14 inches in diameter, a mixing bowl, colander strainer, one large soup spoon, one large slotted spoon, one fork, potato peeler, box grater, sheet tray with grate, and a serving platter. Note that if you do not have a range an electric skillet works well too. Be careful with this in a dormitory room! Next are the ingredients.

9 large potatoes (russets) peeled
3 medium onions (peeled)
3 large eggs (beaten)
Matzo meal (1/4 - 1/2 cup)
Kosher Salt
White Pepper
Secret ingredient

With all the tools and the ingredients prepared, you can begin making the latke. If you have never had a latke, it helps to know what it should look like and how it should feel before it is made. The final latke pancake is about three inches in diameter, crispy on the outside with a firm creamy texture on the inside. It should be golden brown, with crispy strands of potato all around the edges with each strand having flavor of its own.

To make the latke mixture the potatoes and onions need to be shredded on a grater. Doing this by hand helps you feel the texture and get the longest strands possible. Using the grater in a large bowl, hold the potato carefully and slide it down the grater making long strands. Be careful not to shred knuckles. As you grate, alternate potatoes and onions so they will be intertwined. They will begin to give off their liquid so use your hand to press the onions and potatoes down and drain it off.

Once grated and drained, beat three eggs with a fork and fold into the potatoes and onions mixing carefully. Add 1/4 to 1/2 cup of matzo meal (or Panko crumbs) and fold that in to help bind it all together. If it seems too loose, add some more matzo meal. Next, fold in 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1/4 teaspoon pepper and a few shakes of the secret ingredient-Tabasco Sauce.

Fill the pan with 3/4 to 1 inch of oil and heat on medium for about ten minutes. The oil needs to be hot but not smoking. Check the oil's heat by dropping a few strands of potatoes into the pan and watch them sizzle. If the strands cook too fast, lower the heat, if no sizzle, wait a few

more minutes and try again. Next, have a baking sheet with a grate over it to put the latkes on as they come out of the pan. With the oil hot and baking sheets ready, the dance begins.

Pick up some latke mixture with the large soup spoon and place it in the pan at the twelve-o'clock position. Next, use the slotted spoon to press down the potato blob; it should be about three inches in diameter with strands sticking out. Watch the oil work its way in and out of the strands but do not get too mesmerized. Continue to spoon, press, and move in a counterclockwise motion until you have filled the pan with about six latkes. It will take about three to five minutes to get the first batch in the pan. Once you have placed six in the pan it is time to turn over latke # 1. Keep moving around the pan slowly and by the time you get to # 6 it is time to take out # 1. After # 3 is out, take # 1 and put on a cutting board and cut it in half – check the consistency inside and taste it.

The perfect latke is golden brown and crispy on the outside, hot on the inside, creamy, and fluffy and has a taste that combines salt and onion with an aroma that just begs you to take another bite. If you need to adjust the flavor, add salt, pepper, or a little more Tabasco to the mixture and keep going. If you need to cook a little longer or a little shorter then do so. Total cooking time per latke is about six to eight minutes from start to finish. Plan to spend about an hour once you start frying to produce the latkes. Do not stop until they are all cooked and in the tray. Make sure to sprinkle some salt on the latkes as they come out of the pan and onto the draining grate as this helps bring out some more flavor.

During your latke-manufacturing dance, any people who are marveling at this process can get some samples and of course, you will need to keep sampling as well! When you have made the last latke there should be three to four per person and a few extra for later.

To serve, put the latkes around a serving dish surrounding some add-ons to make them even more interesting. Consider, caviar, chopped egg, smoked salmon, applesauce, strawberry jellies, and of course sour cream. A favorite way to eat them is with applesauce or with smoked salmon and capers.

Latkes can be a meal all by themselves or as an addition to most any protein such as roast chicken, pot roast, or fish. Latkes are great any time of the day; you can even take a left over latke and heat it up in a toaster oven.

The latke is a little patch of love that can be made anytime of the year. I have been experimenting with latkes for a long time. Add scallions, or some zucchini, make them thin or fat, small or large until you find what you love. However, I always go back to Aunt Bessie's recipe, as it truly has stood the test of time and has warmed the hearts and pallets of many. Make a few batches for your friends and family and soon you too will become a Latke King!