

Better Roasted Sweet Potatoes

Too often, roasted sweet potatoes turn out starchy and wan. To hit their sweet spot, was it time to throw out a cardinal rule of roasting?

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Sweet potatoes destined for the casserole dish during the holidays often languish under marshmallow toppings, smothered in sweeteners. I've always found this a poor way to treat food that needs little fuss to taste great on its own. Instead, I prefer to call on a method I use for regular potatoes: slice, toss with oil, then roast at a high temperature. When all goes well, the potatoes emerge from the oven with a nicely caramelized exterior, smooth creamy interior, and an earthy sweetness that needs little enhancement.

Trouble is, sweet potatoes don't always behave like their white and yellow-fleshed brethren. Handled the same way, they can come out of the oven tasting starchy and wan. Returning them to the oven for crisping doesn't usually solve the problem—and can even worsen it by burning their edges. Could I figure out a way to tweak this very simple procedure so that it would produce perfect roasted sweet potatoes every time?

The most common shape for roasted potatoes is the wedge, which is easy to cut and allows many pieces to fit on a rimmed baking sheet. But I found wedges unsuitable: The thinner tips finished cooking long before the sides had softened. Cutting the potatoes into 1-inch chunks can help ensure more even dimensions with regular spuds, but the knobby shapes and tapered ends of the sweet potatoes made creating uniform cubes impossible. In the end, I took shape out of the equation and simply cut the sweet potatoes into rounds. While the diameter varied, each round was the same height on the pan; $\frac{3}{4}$ inch thick turned out to be just right.

On to the cooking method. Roasted at 425 degrees (the temperature often recommended for regular spuds), the sweet potatoes browned nicely, but their interiors were starchy and fibrous and lacked sweetness. As I experimented with the oven temperature to get better results, I noticed a curious trend: the lower the temperature, the less browning that occurred but the sweeter the potatoes became. After a little digging, I found an explanation: The starch in sweet potatoes is converted into sugars between 135 and 175 degrees. Once the internal temperature of the potato exceeds 175 degrees, no further conversion occurs. Thus the lower the oven temperature, the longer the potatoes would stay



A thin spatula is ideal for transferring the sticky potatoes.

within this range and the sweeter the spuds.

But dropping the temperature would also mean more time in the oven, and I didn't want a simple side dish to take all day. That's when I remembered a technique I'd come across that totally turned the standard approach to roasting on its head by starting the sweet potatoes in a cold, versus preheated, oven—a different way to keep their internal temperature lower longer. It was worth a try.

I put a batch of potato rounds on a baking sheet, placed them in a cold oven, then cranked the heat to 425, inserting a remote digital thermometer in one of the rounds to track its temperature. After 20 minutes, the thermometer registered 175. I cooked the potatoes for 25 minutes more until the bottom edges browned, then flipped them to let the other side brown. These potatoes tasted vastly better than the ones roasted in a preheated oven, but could I get them sweeter still?

I prepped a new batch, but to further delay heating, I covered them in foil before placing them in a cold oven. This time, the potatoes took 30 minutes to reach 175. I then removed the foil and continued to roast them as before. The 10-minute difference was small but significant. These potatoes were perfect—super-sweet and tender, with a slightly crisp, caramelized exterior. The only problem was they stuck to the pan, easily remedied in my next batch by

covering the bottom of the pan with foil and coating it with cooking spray.

At last, I had roasted sweet potatoes that were simple to make and consistently sweet.

ROASTED SWEET POTATOES

SERVES 4 TO 6

Note that this recipe calls for starting the potatoes in a cold oven. Choose potatoes that are as even in width as possible; trimming the small ends prevents them from burning. If you prefer not to peel the potatoes, just scrub them well before cutting. For our free recipes for Roasted Sweet Potatoes with Maple-Thyme Glaze and Roasted Sweet Potatoes with Spiced Brown Sugar Glaze, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/december.

- 3 pounds sweet potatoes (about 6 medium), ends trimmed, peeled, rinsed, and cut into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick rounds (see note)
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- Ground black pepper

1. Toss potatoes in large bowl with oil, salt, and pepper to taste until evenly coated. Line 18- by 13-inch heavy-duty rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and coat with nonstick cooking spray. Arrange potatoes in single layer on baking sheet and cover tightly with aluminum foil. Adjust oven rack to middle position and place potatoes in cold oven. Turn oven to 425 degrees and cook potatoes 30 minutes.

2. Remove baking sheet from oven and carefully remove top layer of foil. Return potatoes to oven and cook until bottom edges of potatoes are golden brown, 15 to 25 minutes.

3. Remove baking sheet from oven and, using thin metal spatula, flip slices over. Continue to roast until bottom edges of potatoes are golden brown, 18 to 22 minutes longer. Remove from oven; let potatoes cool 5 to 10 minutes; transfer to platter and serve.

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