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How to Make Norwegian Potato Lefse — Stavanger Style

Two foods stir the soul of Norwegian-Americans—lutefisk and lefse. While some may question lutefisk's place in polite society, potato lefse has risen from peasant fare to delicacy status among Viking descendants.



How can a soft flat bread cooked up from potatoes, flour, butter and cream become a universal foodstuff for offspring of Norwegian immigrants? "In America," writes Kathleen Stokker, "the mingling of traditions from different parts of Norway together with the passage of time has resulted in a generalized practice probably unlike any single tradition originally brought from the Old Country."

This happened, we think, partly because lefse is just plain wonderful. But it's also true that lefse is more than the scientific blending of ingredients. It's an art form that requires a few special tools and a preparation that defies simple description. If one "thinks" Norwegian when eating lefse, many say they "feel" Norwegian when making the stuff. Explaining why Minnesotans eat so much lefse, Sylvia Paine wrote in "Land of Lefse" in 1988: "Our hurried, harried lives lack continuity. Eating lefse restores some sense of tradition." Obviously lefse isn't just food, it's legend. There's even an American Lefse Hall of Fame (in Nevada, of all places). Nowadays you can buy lefse from several specialized bakeries, but there's nothing like the enjoyment of fresh homemade lefse slathered with butter and sprinkled liberally with sugar. That indeed is the genuine article one writer has described as "perfectly round, a delicate and translucent potato doily."



Our potato lefse recipe is at least a century old, brought to America by our maternal grandparents from the Stavanger area of western Norway. We're now into four generations of lefse-making on this side of the Atlantic. Always for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but also when the Great Lefse Urge strikes. We stick to ingredients true to the family original—real potatoes, real butter, real cream. In other words, real lefse. Follow our lefse recipe and you too can share a special Norwegian treat with your family.

What potatoes to use...reds or russets or what?

Any potato will probably do and every cook has a favorite. But there are differences. Common reds and new white potatoes are low in starch and high in water content. If you use them, they shouldn't be fresh (grandma said to use old potatoes). Reds and new potatoes take somewhat longer to cook.

Medium-starch, medium-moisture potatoes include

Ingredients:

5 lbs (2+ kg) or about 10 large potatoes
3/4 cup (6 oz) heavy cream
1/2 cup melted butter (= 8 T or 1/4 lb or 1 stick)
1-1/2 tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons salt
4-5 cups all-purpose flour

names like 'all-purpose', Maine, eastern russet, Finnish and Yukon Gold. They are 'mealy' and make for an easily-worked dough and a slightly softer lefse than reds or new whites. Lefse made with yellow-fleshed potatoes like Yukon Gold or Finnish will be 'yellowish' too.

The Idaho baker best represents the high-starch, low moisture variety. Because of their larger size, they take longer to boil in their skins.

Tools you'll need:

- Potato ricer
- Lefse griddle
- Lefse rolling pin
- Rolling pin cover
- Lefse stick
- Lefse board



Prepare the potatoes and basic lefse dough

Boil the Potatoes: There are two ways to boil the potatoes; both produce similar results, although peeled potatoes absorb some cooking water. Cooking without peeling is a little quicker and helps preserve nutrients.

[1] **Peeled method.** Peel and cube the potatoes. Place potato cubes in a large pot, cover with cold water, and bring to a boil. Add a teaspoon or two of salt. Reduce heat and simmer until the potatoes are fork-tender, about 15–20 minutes (russet potatoes cook faster than red ones). Remove pot from heat and drain the cooking water (save the water—it makes excellent soup stock).

[2] **In-the-skin method.** Scrub skins, then place potatoes in a large pot, cover with cold water and bring to boil. Boil gently until a sharp knife easily penetrates a potato, about 20–25 minutes (russet potatoes cook faster than red ones). Remove pot from heat, drain cooking water, and let potatoes cool enough to handle. Remove and discard peels.

Rice the Potatoes: While potatoes are still warm, use a ricer to mash them completely. Rice the potatoes in batches into a large pot or bowl. Then rice the potatoes a second time using a ricing disk with the smallest openings.

Add Butter and Cream: Add cream, melted butter, sugar and salt to the riced (mashed) potatoes and mix thoroughly. Some lefse-makers specify vegetable oil rather than butter; use oil if you wish, but butter is true to Stavanger-style lefse.

Refrigerate the Dough: Cover the dough and refrigerate overnight or NOT LESS THAN 10 to 12 hours. Take this commandment on faith.



Finish the lefse dough

After refrigerating overnight, 'finish' the potato dough with all-purpose flour either by hand or with a heavy-duty mixer. If by hand, sprinkle the working surface with flour and gently knead 2–1/2 to 3 cups all-purpose flour into the dough. If with a mixer, use a dough hook at Speed 2 (Kitchen Aid). Add 2 cups of flour to start, then about 1/4 cup at a time. Dough is ready when it remains slightly sticky but rather smooth and elastic. If using a mixer, it's easier to finish the dough in two batches.



Put dough on a lightly floured surface and divide it into two parts. Roll each part into a log-shaped roll about two inches in diameter (see photo). Slice each log of dough into 10–15 pieces. Cutting into 10 pieces will roll out to lefse rounds about 12 inches in diameter. Cutting the dough into 15 pieces will roll out to smaller rounds about 10 inches across.

Distribute dough pieces on cookie sheets (cover with plastic wrap or wax paper) and put the cookie sheets with the dough into the refrigerator. It's now time to preheat your lefse griddle to 450–475 F. You

will probably need to adjust the griddle temperature slightly after baking your first lefse.

Roll out the lefse

Sprinkle your working surface with flour (best is a covered lefse board or pastry cloth). Take a piece of refrigerated dough and flatten it with your hand. Begin rolling gently from the center of the dough outwards with a 'sock'-covered, rilled rolling pin (see photo on right). With each rolling stroke, rotate the direction slightly so that the dough spreads out evenly into a round shape. Turn the dough over one or more times using a lefse stick, adding flour to the rolling pin and work surface as needed to prevent sticking. [NOTE: Painted rolling pin handles are colorful, but you might discover some unwelcome paint rubbing off and coloring your dough... Fix the problem temporarily by putting some plastic wrap over the handles or permanently by sanding off the paint].

Turn the lefse with a little stick-trick: Insert the stick under the center of the lefse and gently push the stick to the opposite edge (see photo, left). Lift the dough with the stick until it clears the lefse board (see photo below) and then 'roll out' the dough so that –the other side of the dough faces up. Confusing, no? Use the rolling pin to continue making small, rotating strokes from the center to the outer edge. You may have to turn the lefse dough with the stick several times, each time followed by several rolling-pin strokes.

When the lefse dough is as thin as you would like (you should be able to see the stick through the dough), use the stick to lift the dough and lay it out on the heated, UNGREASED griddle.



Bake the lefse



As the lefse bakes, check the underside to see when to turn it over (about 2–3 minutes, depending on the temperature of the griddle and the thickness of the round). There should be some light-brown spots. Some like lefse very lightly freckled; some like it with darker spots. When it's done to your liking, use the stick (as above) to turn the lefse to bake the other side. Gently press down air bubbles with the lefse stick as the second side bakes.

When the lefse is finished baking, slide the stick under the middle and lift the lefse off the griddle. Lay it on a smooth cotton towel. Fold the lefse in half and then fold it once again (see photo below). Cover the baked lefse with part of the towel to keep the lefse moist while cooling. Let the lefse fully cool before packaging.

If you plan to freeze lefse, place waxed paper between each one so that they don't freeze to each other. Package 4 to 6 lefse per plastic bag.



Eat and enjoy

Spread butter and sugar on a fully-opened lefse (you may want to warm it in a microwave oven). Then roll it up and enjoy! Some folks also like brown sugar, jams, preserves, or cranberry sauce rolled inside.