

Hungry In New England

Ode to a baked potato.

February 28, 2017

By Mark Mathew Braunstein

Published:



The flourishing number of vegan and vegetarian restaurants that dot the culinary landscape throughout New England are a blessing for us all. Add to our good fortune the several online guides that help us locate those veg eateries. Naturally, all those directories omit from their listings the chains of greasy fast-food restaurants on whose menus meat predominates. Just because McDonald's serves salads (hold the bacon, hold the chicken, hold the mayo, hold the dressing) hardly makes it a worthy venue for enjoying a meal. Best to drive through the drive-thru. Yet same as for vegetarianism, fast food is here to stay. During long road trips, there might be times when you do not

want to go hungry. In those dire cases, you can resort to the takeout window of a fast-food joint and have delivered right to your car window a gluten-free, oil-free, salt-free, dairy-free, wholesome and filling meal, all embodied within the humble oblong form of a baked potato.

So next time you're famished and a long way from home, drive up to a Wendy's outlet and order a Baked Potato with Nothing on It, meaning no sour cream and chives, no butter, and no margarine. Or as expressed in the vernacular, "no nothing." While a Baked Potato with Nothing on It does not appear on Wendy's menus or signposts, the tidily uniformed cashiers have never been baffled by my order. They all inherently know to enter into their computer and to charge for my charming Baked Potato with Nothing on It the same as for the basic Sour Cream and Chives Baked Potato.

With a base price of \$1.59 (your own local mileage may vary), after tax and tip that comes to an even \$2. Sadly, few carnivores ever tip the staff at fast-food joints, so when I do the recipients really do appreciate it. And they don't just say it, they actually show it. When I say, "Keep the change, sir!" their mouths broaden into smiles and their eyes light up. In more opulent food establishments, 20% may be standard, but when the norm is zero percent the staff consider that especially generous. Tipping generously, indeed excessively, is a strategy I long have employed during those rare events when I live dangerously and risk eating outside of the safety zone of a veg restaurant.

First, I identify myself to the waiter as a vegan. A generation ago, when not even vegetarians knew the word "veganism" or its tenets, vegans had to define its meaning. But times have changed. Next, upon ordering I accordingly seek the waiter's advice about what on the menu is either already vegan or can be veganized. (A baked potato or any other food that does not require a list of ingredients is likely a trustworthy food that requires

no such interrogation.) Later, when I leave a large gratuity I also leave the waiter with the impression that vegans are very generous tippers and maybe even very nice people. Count that as one vote for veganism.

Yet by patronizing a burger eatery, are we not voting for and subsidizing the sales of burgers? Not quite. Wendy's actually loses money on me as a solo driver. Think of all the staff time taken and, sorry to say, all the packaging wasted on a single transaction for a single low-cost item. Is not my time, too, wasted? Not quite, again. On a long car trip, weary drivers need to take breaks to perk up their flagging energy not with the short-lived spike of caffeine but with the lasting sustenance of a simple meal.

Ungarnished with any glop, a spartan baked potato is a wholesome food high in vitamin C, potassium, dietary fiber, and antioxidants, yet it contains no sodium and no fat or oil. That is, when it is baked, not half-baked, not boiled, and not fried. And not microwaved. Thankfully, as boasted on its online menu, "All of Wendy's baked potatoes are oven-baked for a full hour."

On the downside, the Wendy's baked potato is not organically-grown, which is especially unfortunate because potatoes are one sure food where, especially in the peel, you can taste the difference between OG and not. On the plus side, the baked potatoes served at Wendy's are not products of genetic modification. In 1996, Monsanto first marketed GM potatoes but Wendy's, along with McDonald's, refused to buy them primarily due to consumer skepticism. Monsanto soon dropped that hot potato. In 2015, another company has unleashed into the marketplace a potato genetically modified to be optimized for frying, not baking. Yet Wendy's has not yet rescinded its past ban.

You might not relish the simple taste of an unadorned, naked potato. If so, ordering a Potato with Nothing on It then provides you with the perfect

opportunity to put something on it yourself. When you place your order for your primal potato, you can request at no extra cost some mustard or catsup or salad dressing or pepper. You can even ask for a double dose of any of those condiments. I prefer the mustard. Unlike catsup, the mustard contains no sugar or corn syrup. And unlike dressing, the mustard contains no motor grade oil nor dairy. The mustard comes in a plastic cup, not a tiny sliver of a foil packet, so a single serving of mustard is proportionate to the size of the potato. The full order I recite is, "One Baked Potato with Nothing on It, and some mustard on the side, please."

While the size of that container of mustard is uniform, the size of the potato does vary from region to region. In order to standardize the price despite the wide range of costs of living nationally, the price stays the same. It is the size of the potato that changes. For instance, if you embark on a trip down I-95 starting in snowy Maine and head to sunny Florida, the potato grows larger as you travel farther.

In addition to getting your potato, count on receiving some novel responses from the wait staff, ranging from the positive to the amazed, but never the negative. Smiles or chuckles, yes. Sneers or snickers, no. One smiling server, not the cashier I had tipped, with one hand gave me my takeout bag and with her other hand gave me an enthusiastic thumbs up. Maybe she was thinking, "Now there's a customer who knows what to eat!"

Mark Mathew Braunstein is the author of three vegan books and contributes to many holistic health magazines, including twice to Spirit of Change. Though sworn into the Secret Brotherhood of the Baked Potato, neither he nor anyone he knows is affiliated with Wendy's nor with any potato farmer. He profits nothing from the sale of Wendy's baked potatoes and recommends them solely on their merits. Visit www.MarkBraunstein.org.