

LEFSE - after 25 years, I finally figured it out

Equipment needed:

- 16" round griddle (can't have sides)
- 24" lefse stick - the very thin and narrow kind
- Cotton-polyester pastry cloth on a board at least 20" diameter
- Corrugated wooden rolling pin w/ cotton-polyester sock
- Potato ricer or food mill
- Thermometer that reads in the 160° range

Ingredients:

- Russet potatoes
- White flour
- Butter
- Salt
- Sugar

Batch size is measured in pounds of raw potatoes. Recommended sizes:

- Beginner: 5 pounds
- Intermediate: 10 pounds
- Advanced: 15 pounds
- Expert only: 20 pounds or more

A word about instant potatoes: DON'T. The reduced fiber strength in instant potatoes means the dough is less strong and will tear on the stick more easily, making transparent lefse difficult. It also doesn't taste nearly as good. My aunt told me about an old recipe she'd found for instant-potato lefse, upon which her Norwegian mother had written the word "awful". It doesn't take much longer to just use real potatoes, and it will pay off handsomely when it's time to make the lefse.

Proper potato selection is critical. Use russets ONLY, the dry, gnarly, starchy kind, and be certain they are fully dormant - not even a hint of sprouting. If you have the choice of variety, pick Burbank. High starch content and dry flesh is key. The other critical thing is to use cooking methods that keep the potatoes as dry as possible. Water in the dough is the death of good lefse, since it means more flour is needed to counteract it.

And speaking of flour...you'll find recipes for lefse that have cream in them. They make a very different kind of lefse than this recipe, one that I don't care for. Usually double the amount of flour is needed due to all the added liquid. I prefer a lefse that is mostly potato...if I wanted flour I'd have a tortilla. But that's just me.

It's important that the potato pieces are all the same size since this is the only way to prevent over- or undercooking of individual potatoes - they must all be done cooking at the same time. Something I still haven't completely figured out: what size should the potatoes be? Larger potatoes have less surface area and this reduces the amount of water the potatoes will absorb. On the other hand, it takes a lot longer to cook large potatoes and the outside will get cooked considerably more than the center.

Second question: should they be peeled or not? If you don't peel, less water can get in. On the other hand, it takes a long time to peel 20 pounds of hot potatoes, time that you should be spending getting them riced.

My current protocol: Large potatoes, peeled and left whole. I reserve the right to change my mind on this pending further study!

Potato cooking: A special technique known as amylose retrogradation is needed to prevent the potatoes from taking on too much water. The more starch a potato has, the more prone it is to disintegration while boiling - the explosion of starch-filled cells. This turns the potatoes into sponges. Retrogradation gels the starch inside the cells and prevents the cells from exploding when fully cooked.

Cover the potatoes with water from the tap and start heating, watching the thermometer closely. Bring them to the 140-160° range, being careful not to let them exceed this temperature. Hold there for 30 minutes, then drain and run cold water over them until they reach room temperature or lower. Give them enough time to cool off to the center of the potatoes. Stick the thermometer into the middle of one to be sure. The cooling is key to the retrogradation process.

Now put them back on the stove and start heating again. Bring them close to a boil, but keep it just below a boil to prevent jostling of the potatoes. Keep checking them and cook until they are just tender. Immediately drain, then spread them out on a cookie sheet or your counter and let them steam off. Start right in slicing them into quarters, lengthwise, and continue to keep them spread out so they can steam off some more. The goal here is to reduce the amount of water.

Right after you finish slicing them, quickly put through a ricer or food mill. Mashing them with a masher or fork isn't good enough unless you are very careful to eradicate all lumps. DO NOT use a cuisinart or blender since it

breaks cells and compromises the fiber strength. The ricing must happen while the potatoes are still hot so don't waste any time.

Now measure the potatoes. For each 8 cups of riced potatoes, add the following and mix in while still hot:

3/4 cup melted regular (salted) butter

3T sugar

2t salt

After mixing, spread the dough out on a cookie sheet to cool and steam off some more. When the dough is cool, pack in 4-cup batches into containers - I use 4-cup plastic yogurt containers. I like to put a couple layers of paper towels over the top of the potatoes and then put the lid on - this will soak up more water. Chill the potato dough at least 8 hours. Don't blow off this step. Keep the potato dough in the fridge until you are ready to add flour and cook it. If you are using a mixer, put the mixer bowl and paddle in the fridge too.

Now you can set up for lefse-making. Try to place the griddle immediately to the right of your work area (assuming you are right handed). You will also need a spot, ideally just on the other side of the griddle, to deposit the cooked lefse. Heat the griddle to 400°. Put the pastry cover on the board, make sure it's nice and tight. Put the sock on the pin. Fill a sifter with flour. As an initial preparation, sprinkle flour all over the rolling pin and pastry cloth, rubbing it in until it won't hold more. This is the initial preparation.

Now for the biggest secret of all: how to add flour. It's critical that flour not be added to the dough until just before it's to be cooked. When the flour is first added to the potatoes, the dough is drier. As time passes, the flour absorbs water from the dough, and stabilizes in a stickier condition than at first. This is a bad thing since more flour is needed to prevent the dough from sticking. So the key is to take advantage of the brief time after the flour is added, when the dough has not yet stabilized.

Don't even take the potato dough out of the fridge until you have the griddle hot and the pastry cloth and pin ready. Prepare only 4 cups of potato dough at one time. Add 1 cup of flour to 4 cups of chilled potato dough, mix until just combined. Check the dough, it should not be so sticky that it gunks up your hands when you shape into a ball. Add a bit more flour if you have to, to get it right. I have learned that if the dough is too sticky, then too much flour is needed to prevent sticking, and that adheres to the outside of the lefse and makes a floury finished product. Better to have the necessary flour IN

the dough, than ON the dough. That said, this is not an invitation to add too much flour...be sparing, experiment with it.

Quickly shape into 12 balls (experts can go to 10 balls if the griddle is large enough). Beginners, I recommend you start with only 2 cups of dough, with 1/2 cup flour, and make 8 balls, because it will make the lefse smaller and easier to handle while you are learning. Put the mixer and paddle back in the fridge to cool down for the next batch. Immediately start rolling lefse.

Put a blob of dough on the side (not the center) of the pastry cloth. Gently pat it into a round patty a few inches in diameter. Cup the edges in your hand to make the patty smoothly round, with no jagged edges. Push it around the edge of the pastry board a bit, flipping it over to get flour on both sides. Then put the patty in the center of the pastry cloth. Gently roll it out almost paper thin. Take care not to keep pressing down as the pin reaches the edge of the dough. Try to keep the lefse as circular as possible.

Time to transfer to the griddle. Carefully slip the lefse stick under the dough, right down the center. Pick a spot that doesn't have any splits or indents on the edge, either at the point you insert the stick, or at the point the stick will come out on the other side. These points are weak and can initiate a tear, so avoid them. Lift up the lefse, use your hand to support the hanging part, and carry to the griddle. Make sure your supporting hand extends the entire length of the lefse.

If you've made the dough right, it won't tear. Position the lefse right next to the griddle, with the bottom edge even with the top of the griddle. Now move your hand sideways over the griddle, lowering the lefse to the griddle's surface as you go. After the first half of the lefse is on the griddle, you have get the last half off by rolling the stick as you continue to move your hand sideways. (This is hard to describe, but easy to do once you see it demonstrated).

Grill for 25-30 seconds, then flip using the same procedure you used to move the lefse from the pastry cloth to the griddle. The goal on the first side is just to sear the lefse - DO NOT cook until you see brown spots. That should only happen on the second side - for the first side you should see only faint brown specks. Grill the second side another 25-30 seconds or so. The idea here is to cook only as much as is truly necessary. Experiment with it. Overcooking dries it out and ruins it - when we made the dough, we tried to minimize water, but now the goal is to conserve it. The trademark lefse spots on the second side should be light brown. You will may have to adjust the griddle temperature up or down a bit to get it just right.

Have a white linen cloth spread out on the counter. Put the cooked lefse down on one half of the cloth, brush off any flour (there shouldn't be much, if any) then fold the other half of the cloth over the top. As each sheet comes off the griddle, open up the cloth and put it on the stack. Always cover the stack immediately. The moisture must be conserved.

After rolling your first sheet, you'll need to add more flour to both pin and pastry cloth, but not nearly so much as the first time. What I do is flour the pin first, and the excess falls on the board, and then I only need to add a bit more. Use as little as possible, but don't ever forget to flour before each and every sheet, making sure the flour is evenly rubbed in. Pay special attention to the center of the pastry cloth. It tends to need the most flour.

If, heaven forbid, the dough ever sticks, special measures are needed. Scrape all the dough you can off the stuck spot with a scraper or sharp knife. Then rub flour deep into the spot. Even after doing this, you may be plagued by "the spot" for the rest of the lefse-making session. Then about all you can do is put on a new pin sock or pastry cloth - in a pinch you can turn the pastry cloth over, or turn the sock inside out. Be patient. It can take a long time to learn how to roll lefse - don't give in to the temptation to use too much flour. Technique is the key.

Regarding how much flour to use - for a 4-cup batch of potato dough, you add the initial 1 cup of flour, and in the rolling, you should be using no more than an additional 1-1/2 cups of flour. That means the ratio of potato to flour in the finished product should not exceed 4 parts potato to 2-1/2 cups flour. If you use more flour than this, it will still be edible, it will just be more dry and floury. Don't get discouraged if you wind up not making this standard right off the bat. Once you achieve it, keep rolling thinner and thinner, with less and less flour. You'll be amazed how far you can push it.

Some basic maintenance is needed between each 4-cup batch of dough. Do these things after you finish your last piece, but before you mix up the next batch. This is also the time to go to the bathroom or have a cup of coffee. Look over the pin sock and pastry cover for any signs of dough adhesions, fix these as described above, or put on a new sock or cover. Take a scraper and carefully scrap all flour residue off the stick. It can build up a kind of flour varnish. Use a dry scotchbrite if needed to finish getting the gunk off. Now rub in a small amount of canola oil, then wipe dry. The stick must be kept slick and smooth and the oil helps. Next, brush off the griddle with a dry rag. Clean off the counter all around your rolling area, to reduce the chances that you'll set the rolling pin down on a little blob of dough. Finally, move

your lefse pile to another spot on the counter (keep it well covered) and lay out a fresh towel for the next batch.

When the sheets are completely cooled, fold them in half, then in half again, so that each resembles a rounded triangle. Do this with the spot side facing down, so that the spots are visible after they are folded. Now its safe to bag them and store in the fridge. Congratulations!