

Prep (peeling, slicing, measuring)	20-25 minutes	Moderate
Stovetop sauce	8-10 minutes	Moderate (constant whisking)
Assembly	5 minutes	Low
Covered bake	45 minutes	Passive (oven does the work)
Uncovered bake (browning)	20-25 minutes	Passive
Rest	10-15 minutes	Passive
Total time	~1 hour 45 minutes Overall: Easy-Moderate	

Active time: ~35 minutes | Passive time: ~70 minutes

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Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1: Prep the Oven and Dish (5 minutes | Low intensity)

Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Generously butter the inside of your baking dish, including the corners, to prevent sticking.

Step 2: Prepare the Potatoes (15-20 minutes | Moderate intensity)

Peel the potatoes and slice them 1/8-inch thick using a mandoline for uniformity (a sharp knife works too—just aim for even slices so they cook at the same rate). As you slice, transfer the potatoes to a bowl of cold water to prevent browning. When finished, drain and pat dry with clean kitchen towels. Thinly slice the onion and set aside.

Step 3: Make the Cream Sauce (8-10 minutes | Moderate intensity—stay attentive)

In a medium saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the minced garlic and cook for 30 seconds until fragrant—do not let it brown. Whisk in the flour and cook for 1-2 minutes to eliminate the raw flour taste. Gradually pour in the milk and cream while whisking constantly to prevent lumps. Add the salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Continue whisking over medium heat for 4-6 minutes until the sauce thickens enough to coat the back of a spoon. Remove from heat.

Step 4: Assemble the Layers (5 minutes | Low intensity)

Arrange one-third of the potato slices in an even layer in the prepared dish, overlapping slightly. Scatter half the sliced onion over the top. Pour one-third of the cream sauce evenly over the layer. Repeat: another third of potatoes, the remaining onion, another third of sauce. Finish with the final layer of potatoes and pour the remaining sauce over the top, pressing gently so the liquid seeps between the slices.

Step 5: Covered Bake (45 minutes | Passive)

Cover the dish tightly with aluminum foil and bake for 45 minutes. The potatoes should be nearly tender when pierced with a knife. Internal temperature target: the cream sauce should reach about 200–210°F (93–99°C) at this stage.

Step 6: Uncovered Bake for Browning (20–25 minutes | Passive—check once)

Remove the foil. If using cheese, sprinkle it evenly over the top now. Return the dish to the oven uncovered and bake for 20–25 minutes, until the top is golden brown and the sauce is bubbling around the edges. For deeper browning, you may broil on high for the final 2–3 minutes—watch carefully to avoid scorching.

Step 7: Rest and Serve (10–15 minutes | Passive)

Let the dish rest at room temperature for 10–15 minutes before serving. This is essential: the sauce continues to set, making portions hold together beautifully. Garnish with fresh thyme or chives. Serve warm.

Tips for Success

- Slice evenly: Uniform $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch slices are the single biggest factor in even cooking. A mandoline is worth the investment.
- Don't skip the rest: Cutting in too early yields a runny, soupy result.
- Watch the garlic: Burnt garlic turns bitter—30 seconds is all it needs.

- Make it ahead: Assemble through Step 4, cover, and refrigerate up to 24 hours. Add 10–15 minutes to the covered bake time.
 - Reheat gently: Cover with foil and warm at 325°F (165°C) for 20–25 minutes.
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Variations

- Cheesy gratin: Double the cheese (2 cups) and add a pinch of cayenne.
 - Herb-forward: Add 1 teaspoon chopped rosemary or 2 teaspoons Dijon mustard to the sauce.
 - Lighter version: Substitute half-and-half for the cream and use 2% milk.
 - Bacon lovers: Layer 4 slices of cooked, crumbled bacon between the potato layers.
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Nutrition Information (Per Serving)

Based on 8 servings, including the optional cheese. Values are approximate and will vary with specific ingredients.

Nutrient	Amount per Serving
Calories	~340 kcal
Total Fat	21 g
— Saturated Fat	13 g
Cholesterol	65 mg
Sodium	480 mg
Total Carbohydrates	30 g
— Dietary Fiber	3 g
— Total Sugars	5 g
Protein	8 g
Vitamin C	~20% DV
Calcium	~15% DV
Iron	~6% DV
Potassium	~650 mg