This potato thing sizzled into my life when my 6-year-old son decided to cook a potato.

He grated a spud, heated oil in a pan and added the tangle of potato shreds, and had the sense to leave the pan on low heat before getting distracted, which might be the only reason he managed to cook Potato Thing. The human urge to mess with things unnecessarily may have no greater stage than the kitchen. Potato Thing prefers to be left alone. Until it’s time to flip.

I was in the kitchen at just the right time to flip this sizzling disk that smelled of gold. Gazing at the browned side now facing up, I saw the bright, greasy matrix of crunchy potato fibers that I had been smelling. We gathered ‘round the pan, attracted by the smell. When the other side was done, we feasted on the tater tot-like magnificence of a crispy exterior and its pillowy center.

Since then, I’ve been seeing Potato Thing everywhere. Even the gas station the other morning, when my hunting buddy got back into the car with a so-called “Potato Triangle” that looked familiar, or the local greasy spoon, which serves this side called “hash browns.”

The kids kept asking me to make it again, and I tried, but couldn’t recreate the magic of that original thing.

At the farmers market, where so much important information is shared, Big Nancy set me straight on Potato Thing, or “fries,” as she calls them. Big Nancy grows potatoes and high-CBD hemp, and sells sacks of each, potatoes in mesh bags and hemp buds in Zip-Locs.

“You need a really hot pan,” Big Nancy said, nodding understandingly, when I told her about my troubles.

“You know how to make Potato Thing?” I asked, eagerly.

“It’s pretty much the only way I eat spuds.”

For the next three weeks, I made Potato Thing. On weekends I’d visit Big Nancy at the market, buy potatoes and talk Potato Thing.

She recommends waxy potatoes like Huckleberry Gold, a purple skinned yellow-fleshed variety she sells, or its more common cousin the Yukon Gold. A lot of water gets released during the course of a batch, and Big Nancy covers her skillet with a tight fitting lid, which concentrates the steam and cooks the potatoes at a temperature that’s hotter than boiling water. Her cast iron lid collects water, which she occasionally pours off.

When I make it, I squeeze out the water before frying. And that’s not the only way my Potato Thing differs from hers. But we are perfectly aligned in the most important part, where you just stand there and don’t do anything. No stirring. One flip. And it’s done.

“If you want you can put cheese on it,” Big Nancy said, with a twinkle in her eye.

**Potato Thing**

The quantities listed are for a single Potato Thing that will fill a six-inch pan. You can grate and mix larger batches, and even use a larger pan, but keep the individual Potato Things small and manageable. Following Big Nancy’s lead, some cheese, egg or other goodies will add depth and contrast, not to mention protein, to Potato Thing.

*For one 6-inch Potato Thing*

1 lb peeled potato   
1 tablespoon high temperature fry oil (safflower and peanut are my favorites)  
¼ tsp each of salt and pepper  
Optional toppings: cheese, and foods that go with cheese and potatoes like chile flakes, jalapeno slices, egg

Grate the potato and save the small, French fry-sized piece of potato that remains in your fingertips after you don’t grate your knuckles. Squeeze the grated potato in a colander, as if making a snowball, and then transfer the potato to a bowl. Add the salt and pepper (and chile flakes, if you wish) and mix.

Pat the ball into a hockey puck-sized disk that fits on a spatula.

Heat the oil on medium/high. As it heats, add the potato end you didn’t grate, and adjust the heat to a temperature where the fry cooks gently, bubbling contentedly but not menacingly. That’s your cue that the oil is ready.

Remove the small fry and add the puck of shredded potato.

Use a spatula, fork or even your fingers to shape the thing into a circle that’s about a half-inch deep. Press gently on the thicker parts, first in the center and then the edges, while pulling in the rim to keep it sharp. By this time it should be sliding in the pan like an air hockey puck. Put the lid on and hover nearby on alert. The minute you start to smell a hint of overbrowning, flip it.

If you look at the bottom and conclude you flipped it too early, you can re-flip it again later. For now, let the new side cook, lid on.

If it looks like it needs oil, add just a little, or some butter. When you smell brown, turn it down, and let it slowly cook home. Turning down the heat at the end allows time to add toppings like cheese, a fried egg or both.

Put the lid back on to melt the cheese. Serve hot.

If it cools down, don’t despair. Re-fried in oil, Potato Thing reheats as well as any leftover, but more golden.