

////// TASTE OF TRADITION

shrimp and grits

This classic coastal dish now defines our region.

BY VIRGINIA WILLIS / RECIPE DEVELOPMENT AND FOOD STYLING BY RACHAEL DAYLONG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH ARRINGTON



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Shrimp and grits have become nearly as iconic in Southern cuisine as sweet tea and fried chicken, so much so that during the 2012 Democratic Convention, the *Charlotte Observer* reported the dish was described as the “most popular nosh, served in everything from cocktail glasses to chafing dishes.” First of all, Charlotte, North Carolina, isn’t exactly a hotbed—or would that be a simmering pot?—of activity for shrimp and grits. Second, my grandmother would have laughed at grits in a cocktail glass.

Shrimp and grits are traditional Lowcountry fare. Perhaps the epicenter of the shrimp and grits phenomenon is Charleston, South Carolina. Charleston is one of the most popular travel destinations in the United States and home to some of the country’s finest restaurants. My friend and mentor Nathalie Dupree, who now lives in Charleston, has an entire cookbook devoted to shrimp and grits. She writes, “Shrimp and grits, one of the South’s most beloved foods, leaves a lingering taste and a folkloric mystique that borders on the mythical. Each community and ethnic group along the region’s shorelines brings its own cultural influences to the dish.”

Her book includes fancied recipes for Shrimp and Grits Eggs Benedict and Corn Timbales with Shrimp and Grits. Pretty elaborate stuff. Shrimp and grits might be gussied up by serving them at parties as fancy hors d’oeuvres, made rich with heavy cream and imported cheeses and combined with herbs and spices. But traditionally, grits were poor-people food.

For centuries, corn was grown and eaten fresh in the summer and dried and ground into meal for boiling and baking in the winter. Ground corn in the form of grits is simple country food and a touchstone of Southern cooking. With the price of shrimp per pound close to double digits, they might seem fancy food, too, but not if you live on the coast and harvest them yourself



for free. Southerners have the Gulf of Mexico to the south and the Atlantic Ocean to the east, so there is a great deal of seafood in our traditional cooking. Southerners have long relied on fish and shellfish harvested from the sea.

Shrimp and grits was an inexpensive and filling plate, most often served at home for breakfast, possibly with a homemade biscuit to sop up the sauce. This dish has certainly surpassed its regional boundaries, as Southern cuisine continues to be popular outside the South. Shrimp and grits might just be leading the charge. From Portland, Oregon, to Miami, Florida, you can get your grits on.

The variations on shrimp and grits are endless, but I prefer a simple tomato sauce with the shrimp lightly poached in the sauce as it cooks. I like to taste the sweetness of the shrimp and let the flavor of the corn shine. Meaty, smoky bacon-enhanced versions of shrimp and grits are popular, too. And there are mash-ups with curry sauce, Creole flavors, and those served extra-Southern with a heaping dollop of pimiento cheese. Every chef and home cook stirs the pot his or her own way. Breakfast, dinner, or “brinner,” served in a cocktail glass or a chafing dish, shrimp and grits is indeed a popular nosh. 🍴



Note: We suggest 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley, 2 teaspoons chopped fresh oregano, and 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme.

SHRIMP WITH PARMIGIANO-REGGIANO GRITS AND TOMATOES

Recipe by Virginia Willis
Yield: 4 to 6 servings

Grits

- 2 cups water
- 2 cups low-fat 2% milk
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 cup stone-ground grits
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter

Tomato Gravy

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 (28-ounce) can whole tomatoes with juice, such as San Marzano, coarsely chopped

- 2 bay leaves, preferably fresh
- 1 pinch ground red pepper
- 24 large fresh shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 1/4 cup loosely packed assorted fresh herbs, coarsely chopped (see note)
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

Garnish: shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and fresh herbs

1. In a medium saucepan, bring 2 cups water, milk, and salt for grits to a gentle boil. Whisk in grits. Reduce heat to simmer, and cook, stirring often with a wooden spoon, until mixture is smooth and thick and falls easily from spoon, 25 to 60 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, in a large skillet, heat

olive oil for gravy over medium heat. Add onion and garlic, and sauté until soft and translucent, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in tomatoes with juice and bay leaves. Season with red pepper. Reduce heat, and simmer until mixture is slightly thickened, 5 to 10 minutes.

3. Increase heat to medium-high, and add shrimp. Cook until shrimp are pink and firm, an additional 3 to 5 minutes. Remove skillet from heat, and stir in herbs. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper.

4. When grits have thickened, stir in cheese and butter. To serve, place a heaping spoonful of grits on a plate. Top with shrimp and tomato gravy. Garnish with freshly shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano and fresh herbs, if desired. Serve immediately.

SHRIMP AND GRITS TART

Yield: approximately 8 servings

- 3 cups water
 - 1 cup yellow quick grits
 - 2 teaspoons salt, divided
 - 1 (10.5-ounce) package goat cheese, divided
 - 1 tablespoon chopped fresh dill
 - 2 tablespoons butter
 - 4 plum tomatoes, sliced
 - 1/2 pound medium fresh shrimp, peeled and deveined
 - 10 stalks asparagus, ends trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces
 - 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- Garnish: fresh dill sprigs

1. Place a 10-inch ovenproof skillet in the oven while it preheats to 400°.
2. In a medium saucepan, combine 3 cups water, grits, and 1 teaspoon salt over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil; reduce heat to simmer, and cook, stirring frequently, until grits are creamy, approximately 6 minutes. Stir in half of goat cheese (approximately 5 ounces) and dill.

3. Remove skillet from oven; add butter, swirling to coat. Pour grits into hot skillet and spread in an even layer. Layer tomatoes, shrimp, and asparagus on top of grits. Sprinkle with remaining goat cheese, remaining 1 teaspoon salt, and pepper.
4. Bake until shrimp are opaque, approximately 20 minutes. Garnish with dill, and serve at room temperature.



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SHRIMP, SAUSAGE, AND KALE OVER FONTINA GRITS

Yield: approximately 4 servings

- 3¹/₄ cups water, divided**
- 1 cup whole milk**
- 1 cup stone-ground white grits**
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme**
- 1 cup shredded fontina cheese**
- 8 ounces bulk pork breakfast sausage**
- 8 cups chopped kale (approximately 8 ounces)**
- 2 tablespoons butter**
- 1/2 pound medium fresh shrimp, peeled and deveined**
- 1 cup chopped green Castelvetrano olives, such as Mezzetta brand**
- 1/2 teaspoon salt**
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper**

- 1.** In a medium saucepan, stir together 3 cups water, milk, grits, and thyme. Bring to a boil; reduce heat to simmer, and cook, stirring frequently, until creamy, approximately 25 minutes. Stir in cheese.
- 2.** In a large skillet, cook sausage over medium-high heat until crumbled and very brown, approximately 10 minutes. Add kale and remaining 1/4 cup water; cover and cook until tender, approximately 15 minutes. Remove from pan. Set aside.
- 3.** Add butter to same skillet; return heat to medium-high. Add shrimp, and cook until pink and firm, approximately 6 minutes. Return sausage and kale to pan along with chopped olives; cook just until warm. Stir in salt and pepper. Serve over hot grits.