



CHEFS SAY TAKE TIME TO PREPARE GRITS TO ENSURE QUALITY

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Finally, Americans who live north of the Mason-Dixon line are discovering true grits.

Long a staple of the Southern diet and in northern Italy, corn grits have worked their way into fine dining restaurants in Western Pennsylvania. That's where many locals see and taste them for the first time.

"You'll see it less at mom-and-pop restaurants in the North, where (the hot cereal) usually is cream of wheat or oatmeal," says Jason Shaffer, executive chef at The Renaissance Hotel's Opus restaurant, Downtown. "I'll serve risotto on a fall menu, but in the spring, I'll change to grits."

Good grits are "a matter of how much time you take to put into it," says Shaffer, whose spring menu includes New Orleans Amber BBQ Shrimp with stone-ground grits finished with vodka and herb salad. Depending on the grind, it will take 25 or 30 minutes of cooking or merely a few -- and the quality, texture, consistency and flavor will differ greatly, too.

Then there are the additions -- cooking the grits in stock adds flavor, says Richard Dale, executive chef at The Renaissance. Recipes from coast to coast feature everything from butter and salt, to herbs, cheeses, bacon, poultry, greens, chiles and even artichokes.

"I've even made french fries out of grits," Shaffer says. Make the grits, season them well, pour into a pan, refrigerate, then cut into sections and deep-fry. He buys grits from a woman in Oxford, Miss., who grinds her own corn on Sunday and ships it out on Monday and Tuesday. "She's closed the rest of the week."

Milled dried corn is the foundation for the old-fashioned Pennsylvania Dutch breakfast dish called scrapple -- ponhaus -- where it is cooked with water, pork and sometimes sage, packed in a loaf pan, chilled, then sliced and fried in bacon fat. In Philadelphia, its history dates to 1817. A similar item popular in Cincinnati is called goetta, where rolled oats replaces the cornmeal, according to "The Encyclopedia of American Food & Drink."

Both chefs have three words for grits cooks: "Take your time." Says Shaffer, "Bring it to a simmer, turn it off, and forget about it."

"It's almost like jasmine rice," Dale says. "You fluff it with a fork. You don't want to overcook it and turn it to wallpaper paste."

Grits are made from the same dried corn -- yellow or white -- as polenta and cornmeal. It's just a matter of how



the grain is milled, says Virginia Willis, author of the new "Bon Appetit, Y'all: Recipes and Stories from Three Generations of Southern Cooking" (Ten Speed Press, \$32.50).

"Fine, medium or coarse, those are the grades," Willis says. "You use what's called dent or flint corn, not sweet corn, to process these products." Dent corn ("field corn") refers to a variety where the kernel becomes dented as it shrinks. American Indians preferred flint corn for their cooking and baking; blue corn is part of its family.

"Cornmeal is generally more finely ground than grits and polenta," she says.

The phenomenon of raising grits to haute cuisine levels started about 10 years ago in upscale American restaurants. Southerners wondered what the fuss was about.

"It's poor people's food," Willis says.

The "preferred" color of grits among the well-to-do is white -- ironic, because yellow corn contains carotene -- vitamin A -- and white doesn't.

Southerners don't call it "cornmeal mush," Willis says. "That term isn't used in the South, although it's the same thing as grits. And 'polenta' does sound better than cornmeal mush."

Polenta, a type of grits, is common fare in Northern Italy, with its roots also in peasant cooking. Many Italian restaurants in Pittsburgh feature polenta, including Enrico's Ristorante in Shadyside, where executive chef Jason Sicher cooks polenta to serve with fresh fish and meat dishes.

Piccolo Forno in Lawrenceville has Crostini di Polenta, baked polenta squares topped with gorgonzola spread, mushroom spread and marinated roasted cherry tomatoes. Eleven in the Strip District accompanies its Elysian Fields Farm lamb with polenta. And Sassy Marie's Bar and Restaurant in the North Side serves grilled polenta with a fire-roasted salsa.

Corn -- which is a grass -- calls South America its home.

"It was taken by the explorers from South and Central America to Europe," Willis says.

A wild ancestor of corn -- the cereal also is called maize -- also was found in excavations of the foundations of a building in Mexico City. The sample was estimated to be 70,000 years old, before man inhabited the area, according to "The Oxford Companion to Food" by Alan Davidson (Oxford University Press, \$65).

Dried corn appears regularly on American tables, the stuff of corn cakes, corn muffins, corn bread and spoon bread. Finely milled grains also are scattered across baking pans and pizza peels as a nonstick agent for baking



pizzas. Chefs roll meats, poultry and fish in cornmeal as a coating for baking or frying.

The one cuisine that seems to resist corn is French cooking.

"It's just been introduced within the last 10 years," Willis says. "There, corn is for the animals. It's a product to feed the cows and the chickens."

There is a race among American chefs to find the best and the freshest cornmeal to use in their kitchens. Sean Davies, executive chef at The Original Fish Market Restaurant, Downtown, swears by products from Anson Mills in South Carolina. Owner Glenn Roberts organically grows, harvests and mills near-extinct varieties of heirloom corn that were enjoyed by Southerners before the Civil War.

His "antebellum" flint and dent corn crops are a result of intense searching for these varieties -- listed in plantation inventories and recipes -- along the back roads of South Carolina. He mills the rare grits, cornmeal and polenta -- as well as farro, buckwheat, oats, rice and wheat flour -- to order and ships them at 10 degrees below zero to protect quality.

Among Roberts' initial customers were famed chefs Thomas Keller, Charlie Trotter and Tom Colicchio.

"Mass-produced products that are shelf-stable have had the germ removed," Willis says. The germ is the smallest portion of the kernel and is the only portion that contains fat. "If the germ is still attached, the product is very perishable. You must keep it refrigerated."

Anson Mills is one of a growing number of high-quality corn growers and millers in the United States, Willis says.

"Their products have bite and texture," she says. "These producers are going back to where we began."

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

- Dent or flint corn ("field") is used to make polenta, grits and cornmeal. This corn differs from the fresh kind used for human consumption. Field corn also is used to distill ethanol.
- Pure corn products are gluten-free and can be eaten by people who suffer from celiac disease. Celiac disease is an autoimmune condition of the digestive tract, and patients cannot tolerate foods containing gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley and rye.
- Whole hulled kernels are called hominy. Cut into small bits, the kernels become grits. For the most flavor and nutrition, look for speckled grits and whole-grain, stone-ground cornmeal, preferably frozen or refrigerated.



They are extremely perishable because the germ still is intact. If you do not have access to these products -- check a natural or health foods store -- you can order them online. If buying shelf-stable, packaged products, grab those with the longest expiration date, which means they are fresher.

- Masa -- the Quaker Oats product is called Masa Harina -- is corn finely ground into a flour that is used to make Mexican cornmeal dough for tortillas, Southwestern breads and tamales.

BASIC GRITS

This recipe for plain grits is from "Whole Grains Every Day Every Way" by Lorna Sass (Clarkson/Potter Publishers, \$32.50). Use a heavy-bottomed pot to avoid sticking.

- 4 1/2 cups water
- 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup yellow or white corn grits (not instant)

Bring water and salt to a boil in a heavy Dutch oven or saucepan. Whisk in the grits and return to boiling. Cover, reduce the heat and simmer, stirring occasionally to prevent the grits from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Continue cooking until the grits swell and are tender and the mixture is creamy and thick, for 50 to 60 minutes. Add more water, if needed, to prevent the mixture from becoming too dry before the grits are thoroughly cooked.

Makes 4 cups.

Variations:

- Use half water and half milk, and stir in butter after cooking.
- After cooking, stir in 1/2 to 1 cup grated cheddar cheese.

MEME'S CORNMEAL GRIDDLE CAKES

"Cornmeal griddle cakes are the most basic of Southern breads," writes Virginia Willis, author of "Bon Appetit, Y'all: Recipes and Stories from Three Generations of Southern Cooking" (Ten Speed Press, \$32.50). "Biscuits require expensive dairy products, while cornmeal griddle cakes, also known as hoe cakes, can be made with little more than meal, a bit of oil and water." These were served as a quick bread on the side, especially delicious when used to sop up juices and gravy.



- 2 cups white or yellow cornmeal
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- 1 cup water, more if needed
- 1/4 cup corn oil, for frying

To prepare the batter, in a large bowl, whisk together the cornmeal, baking powder and salt. In a second bowl or a large liquid measuring cup, combine the egg and 1 cup water. Whisk until smooth. Stir the wet ingredients into the dry ingredients, using as few strokes as possible.

To fry the griddle cakes, heat the oil in a cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Ladle 1/4 cup batter onto the heated skillet. Repeat with additional batter, without crowding.

Cook the cakes until the bottoms are brown and bubbles form on the tops and edges, for 2 to 3 minutes. Turn and brown the other sides for an additional 2 to 3 minutes. Serve immediately.

Makes 12 cakes.

GRITS WITH CORN AND VIDALIA ONION

Virginia Willis, author of "Bon Appetit, Y'all" says to use fresh corn to make this recipe. After purchase, use the corn without 24 hours. Vidalia onions -- a supersweet variety -- are in season now. Grate the onion on a box grater so it melts into the grits and adds moisture.

- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 onion, preferably Vidalia, grated
- Scraped kernels from 2 ears fresh sweet corn (about 1 cup)
- 2 cups whole milk
- 2 cups water



- Coarse salt
- 1 cup stone-ground or coarse-ground grits
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3/4 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (about 3 ounces)
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste

In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onion and cook, stirring, until transparent, for about 2 minutes. Add the corn and cook, stirring occasionally, until the kernels become soft, for about 5 minutes.

Add the milk, water and 1 teaspoon salt. Bring to a boil over high heat. Whisk in the grits; decrease the heat to low and simmer, whisking occasionally, until the grits are creamy and thick, for 45 to 60 minutes. Stir in the butter, cheese, parsley and chives. Taste and adjust seasoning, using salt and pepper.

Chard with Cheese Polenta and Sesame Seeds

This recipe is from "The Omega 3 Cookbook: Over 100 Smart Recipes for the Body and Brain" by Michael van Straten (Kyle Books, \$16.95 paperback). Polenta, the author writes, "is a good source of potassium, iron, B vitamins and fiber."

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 10 ounces young Swiss chard leaves, finely chopped
- 5 tablespoons sesame seeds
- 1 pound instant polenta
- 2 ounces shredded mixed parmesan and Gruyere cheeses



Heat the oven to 400 degrees.

Heat the oil in a large skillet and saute the garlic gently until soft but not browned. Add the chard and sesame seeds, stirring until wilted. Set aside.

Cook the polenta according to package directions. Spoon half into an ovenproof dish. Spread the chard mixture over the top and cover with the rest of the polenta and the cheese. Bake for about 15 minutes, until the cheese is bubbling and golden.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

CORN PIZZA

This recipe is adapted from “James McNair’s New Pizza: Foolproof Techniques and Fabulous Recipes” (Chronicle Books LLC, 2000). A prolific cookbook author, McNair writes, “Inspired by a pizza that I enjoyed many years ago at Pizzeria Viccolo in San Francisco, I created this summer treat for my ‘Corn Cookbook’....When I’ve had my fill of corn on the cob, this delectable concoction renews my enthusiasm for sweet fresh corn. And teaming it with a cornmeal crust heightens the corn flavor.”

- Cornmeal Pizza Dough (recipe follows)
- 8 medium-size ears fresh corn, shucked
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic, or to taste
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- Cornmeal, for sprinkling pizza peel
- 2 cups freshly shredded premium semisoft mozzarella cheese (about 6 ounces), preferably made with whole milk
- 1 cup freshly shredded smoked Gouda, mozzarella or other smoked cheese (about 4 ounces)
- All-purpose flour, for rolling out dough
- Extra-virgin olive oil, for brushing and drizzling



- 1/2 cup slivered drained sun-dried tomatoes in olive oil, optional
- 1/2 cup finely chopped red onion
- 1/2 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese (about 2 ounces), preferably Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 1/4 cup minced fresh herb, such as chives, sage or summer savory

Prepare the Cornmeal Pizza Dough and set aside to rise.

Rest the base of an ear of corn on a large, deep plate or inside a large bowl. Using, a sharp knife, cut down the length of the cob from the tip to the base. Leave behind a bit of the pulp to avoid mixing tough corn fibers into the corn. Rotate the ear until you have stripped it of kernels. Turn the knife blade over and scrape the cob with the blunt edge to remove the pulp and milky juices. Repeat with the remaining ears of corn. There should be about 4 cups kernels.

In a saute pan or skillet, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the corn and garlic and cook, stirring frequently, until the corn is tender, for about 4 minutes for young corn or for as long as 8 minutes for older corn. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer to a bowl and set aside to cool to room temperature.

About 30 minutes before baking the pizza, position a baking stone on the lowest rack of the oven. Heat the oven to 500 degrees. Sprinkle a pizza peel with cornmeal and set aside.

In a bowl, combine the mozzarella and smoked cheeses and set aside.

On a lightly floured surface, roll out or stretch the dough and shape it as desired. Place the dough on the prepared peel. Brush the dough all over with olive oil, then top with the cheese mixture, leaving a 1/2-inch border around the edges. Scatter the tomatoes over the cheese, then top with the corn, sprinkle with the onion and drizzle with more olive oil. Give the peel a quick, short jerk to be sure that the bottom of the crust has not stuck to it.

Transfer the pizza to the hot oven and bake until the crust is golden, for about 10 minutes.

Remove the pizza to a wire rack and let stand for about 2 minutes, then transfer to a butting tray or board and lightly brush the edges of the crust with olive oil. Sprinkle with the parmesan cheese and herb of choice. Slice and serve immediately.

Makes 1 large pizza, 8 servings.



CORNMEAL PIZZA DOUGH

These directions are for using a food processor to mix and knead the dough. The dough also can be made by hand, with a heavy-duty stand mixer or in a bread machine, according to manufacturer's directions.

- 1 cup warm water (110 degrees to 115 degrees)
- 2 1/4 teaspoons (1 packet or 1/4 ounce) active dry yeast
- 1 cup yellow cornmeal or polenta (coarse cornmeal)
- About 2 1/4 cups unbleached all-purpose, bread or semolina flour, divided, more for kneading
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup olive oil, preferably extra-virgin, more for greasing bowl

Pour 1 cup warm water into a small bowl. Sprinkle the yeast over the water, stir to dissolve and set aside.

In the bowl of a processor bowl fitted with the metal blade, combine the cornmeal, 2 cups flour and the salt; process to mix well, for about 5 seconds. Add the yeast mixture and 1/4 olive oil and process continuously until the dough forms a single ball or several masses on top of the blade, for about 30 seconds.

Pinch off a piece of dough and feel it. If it is too sticky, continue processing while gradually adding just enough of the remaining 1/4 cup flour for the dough to lose most of its stickiness. If the dough is dry and crumbly, add warm water, 1 tablespoon at a time, and process until the dough no longer is too dry.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface and knead by hand until shiny and elastic, adding flour as needed, for about 2 minutes.

Generously grease a large bowl with oil. Shape the dough into a smooth ball and place it, smooth top down, in the bowl, then turn to coat the top with oil. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let rise until doubled, for about 1 1/2 hours. Punch down the dough gently to prevent overrising. If you are using bread flour or semolina flour, re-oil the bowl and let it rise again.

The dough is ready to be prepared for baking.



SHRIMP AND CHEESE GRITS CASSEROLE

This recipe is featured in "Holly Clegg's Trim & Terrific Freezer Friendly Meals: Quick and Healthy Recipes You Can Make in Advance" (Running Press, \$19.95 spiral). She recommends this as a breakfast dish.

- 1 cup quick grits
- 3 cups water
- 1/2 cup skim milk
- 1 1/2 cups shredded reduced-fat sharp cheddar cheese, divided
- 1/4 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- Dash cayenne pepper
- Vegetable cooking spray
- 1/3 cup diced Canadian bacon
- 1 pound medium-sized shrimp, peeled
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 cup chopped green onions

Cook the grits in the water and milk according to the instructions on the package. When the grits are ready, stir in 1 cup cheddar cheese, the parmesan, paprika and cayenne and stir until the cheese is melted.

Coat a large nonstick skillet with vegetable cooking spray and set over medium heat. Add the Canadian bacon and saute until it begins to brown. Add the shrimp and garlic, and cook, stirring, until the shrimp are fully pink and almost done, for 3 to 5 minutes. Add the lemon juice. Remove from the heat and stir in the grits mixture. Season



with salt and black pepper and add the green onions.

Coat a 2-quart casserole dish with vegetable cooking spray. Transfer the grits and shrimp to the prepared dish. Sprinkle with the remaining 1/2 cup cheddar cheese. Serve immediately, or heat the oven to 350 degrees and bake for 10 minutes or until the cheese is melted.

Or, let cool, wrap, label and freeze for as long as 2 months. Remove from the freezer to thaw. Bake for 30 minutes in a 350-degree oven, covered, until thoroughly heated.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

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