

Hogtown HomeGrown

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Grits, greens and gravy—part one

I don't know about you, but I grew up eating grits—regular white hominy grits, instant grits, and, on vacation at Callaway Gardens, slow-cooked speckled-heart grits. Grits have been a staple on Southern tables and, at times, saved struggling families from starvation as the stomach-filling accompaniment for the greens and gravy common to a subsistence diet. No breakfast order would be complete without grits, and, until recently, most Southern restaurants did not ask, grits just showed up on your plate, not unlike the sugar in your iced tea.

Unlike the hot cereals eaten by those raised in the North, grits are not a thin porridge-type vehicle for sugar or syrup. Well-cooked grits should be thick, not a watery texture that needs a bowl. A puddle of grits has a sense of structure, with enough surface tension to form its own borders. And don't pass the syrup, because Southern grits are savory, with butter and salt liberally added. In our family, we have taken savory to a new level. Our grits are redolent with the bite of sharp cheese, the sting of hot sauce and the glory of garlic. And therein lies our tale of young love...

Once upon a time, a boy from the North met a girl with Southern roots. Despite some early skirmishes over restaurant breakfast tables when he put butter and sugar on his grits, they learned to love each other and married. Through the years she nurtured him with food and expanded his horizons by adding first cheese, then hot sauce, and, finally, garlic to his grits. He came to love them and requested more and more garlic until every pot of her grits were filled with sharp cheddar and studded with chunks of roughly-chopped garlic.

Their love produced three boys, all raised on garlic cheese grits and the occasional packet of instant grits. As they grew, a favorite breakfast or dinner was cheese grits and eggs—a big thick puddle of garlic cheese grits on each plate topped with two fried eggs. Just like their mom's Southern ancestors, grits were used as a cheap way to fill rapidly growing boys with huge appetites.

Boys grow into men and move from their homes to other adventures. The oldest worked away from home the summer before college and fell in love. The young lovers parted knowing they lived far from each other, but with hope. As he got ready for college, the whole family took one last vacation together before he moved out. Renting a place where they could cook was the only way they could afford to stay at the beach, so they cooked their meals and ate together.

Young love was strong and the girl was willing to take a 15 hour bus ride to be with her beloved for just two days. Permissions were sought and granted by all the parents and the couple was reunited. On that first morning, as she met his family, she was nervous, but the warm welcome soothed her as they sat down to eat. And then she looked at her plate.

Grits were not something she was fond of—she found the texture off-putting and the taste bland, but she was eating her first meal at the table of what she hoped would be her future mother-in-law, so she took a bite. (Right now would be a good time to tell you that her mother did not cook with garlic, certainly not chunks of garlic, and definitely not in grits.)

She tried not to panic, but what was she going to do? She couldn't eat them, she couldn't hide them and she certainly couldn't say anything because everyone else was eating them like they were ambrosia. She nibbled, she picked, the meal ended and the future mother-in-law never noticed. The lovers endured through a long-distance relationship for several years and eventually they married. Years later she told her mother-in-law the story and they laughed and laughed. Her mother-in-law still recounts it, a bit too much, but it still gets a smile from the daughter-in-law.

She still does not eat grits, but that has not stopped the love affair. Recently, the son called his mom while his wife was away. He was cooking dinner for their young daughter and needed a recipe for one of his favorite meals—cheese grits and eggs. The slow-cooked grits were filled with cheese and garlic, hot sauce on the side. The granddaughter cleaned her plate and asked for more!



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Citrus Time

Take advantage of the abundant citrus varieties this time of year.

Think about all the things you can do with citrus beyond peeling and eating. Try

peeled and chopped orange in black beans. Pull apart a tangerine and toss it in a green salad. Freeze the juice of sour oranges and Meyer lemons for bright flavor in your summertime tea.

Grate their zest and freeze or dehydrate for use in baked goods. Try one or all of the three types of grapefruit to choose from this month—red, pink and white.

Go old school—halve one, sprinkle a little sugar on top and broil it until the sugar melts!

What's Fresh Right Now?

- Beans**—green, yellow, pole
- Beets**
- Bitter Melon**
- Bok Choy**
- Broccoli**
- Cabbage**—green/red, napa, savoy, cone
- Carrots**
- Cauliflower**—white, romanesco
- Celery**
- Citrus**—grapefruit, oranges, tangelos, juices, lemons, limes, mandarin/satsumas, kumquat, calamondin
- Cucumbers**—mini seedless
- Eggplant**
- Garlic**—chives, elephant
- Greens**—wild/regular arugula, kale, collards, mustards, broccoli leaf, turnip, tsai tai, bok choy, chard
- Herbs**—parsley, cilantro, lemongrass, lime leaf, dill, rosemary, basil
- Honey**
- Kohlrabi**—green, purple
- Lettuce**—bibb, oak leaf, green/red leaf, romaine, spring mix
- Microgreens**—assorted
- Mushrooms**—shiitake, dried varieties
- Onions**—green scallions
- Peppers**—red/green bell, poblano, cubanelle, jalapeno, ghost
- Potatoes**—small red, white/purple/orange sweet
- Radish**—red globe, french breakfast, daikon, black
- Shoots**—pea, sunflower, mix
- Sprouts**
- Strawberries**
- Tomatoes**—grape, green, sun gold, cluster
- Turnips**—large/small varieties

Local and Fresh— Chayote

You've seen them at the farmers market or grocery store—the shape of a mango, the color of celery, and wrinkles on either side of a center “seam”—it's a chayote. These tropical squash have a texture best described as a cross between potato and cucumber, and a taste that is so mild that it disappears when combined with other foods.

Known in Cajun country as a mirliton, they are most often boiled whole and stuffed with shrimp and bread crumbs or mashed into a sweet pie. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings includes a recipe in *Cross Creek Cookery* for Chayotes Au Gratin, boiled cubes covered with a thick cream sauce and topped with cheese.

Boiling chayote makes it watery and it must be drained after cooking. The resulting loss of vitamins, as well as the extra work, made me look for a better way to cook them.

Roasting chayote results in great texture and taste, without any extra water to drain. If adding to soups or stir fries, just peel, chop and cook as you would any other squash.

Roasted Chayote

INGREDIENTS

- 2 medium chayote
- 1 Tablespoon olive oil
- 1-2 teaspoons dried herbs
- pinch of salt, if desired

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

The skin is edible, but if it has thorns or seems thick, peel it before cutting. Slice in half along the seam and remove the seed if it is large.

Chop into bite-sized pieces. Toss with oil and herbs. Do not use the salt until after it is cooked and you have tasted it.

Bake 30-45 minutes on cookie sheets or in baking pans, shaking occasionally. Pieces will be lightly browned and tender.

Serve hot or at room temperature.

Fresh Tuna Salad

INGREDIENTS

1 pound oil poached tuna

Classic American

2 Tablespoons each mayonnaise and finely chopped celery, 2 teaspoons prepared mustard

Optional—onion, fresh dill, sweet OR dill pickle relish, grated apple

Italian

1/4 cup each finely chopped fennel, celery, artichoke, red pepper, red onion, fresh basil

Optional—roasted garlic, oil-cured olives, capers

French

1/4 cup each finely chopped boiled potato, green beans, nicoise olives, tomatoes

Optional—hard-boiled egg, capers, anchovies

Mexican

1/4 cup each finely chopped tomato (seeded), avocado, green onion, roasted poblano

Optional—sliced green olives, Mexican crumbling cheese, cilantro

Vinaigrette for Italian, French and Mexican—1/4 cup olive oil, juice and zest of one lemon, 2 Tablespoons vinegar, 1 Tablespoon roasted garlic, 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard, salt and pepper

DIRECTIONS

Break tuna into small pieces as desired. Mix with chosen ingredients.

Serve immediately or cover and chill salad before serving.

Refrigerate leftovers and eat within a day or two.

Sweet Potato Chipotle Corn Chowder

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons olive oil

1 small onion, chopped

2 large cloves garlic, smashed and chopped

1 chayote, peeled and cubed

2 carrots, chopped

2 medium sweet potatoes, peeled and cubed

1 teaspoon each ground coriander and cumin

4 cups whole corn kernels (frozen works well)

4 cups each water and no-chicken or veggie broth

1 Tablespoon canned chipotle with adobo, smashed into paste

1 cup milk or cream

DIRECTIONS

In a large pot, sauté onion in oil. Add remaining ingredients, except milk, and simmer until carrots and sweet potatoes are tender. Stir in milk. Taste and add salt, if desired.

Serve hot. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Tricks and Tips

Using fresh tuna in salads, instead of canned, not only improves the flavor, but the texture as well. Poaching in water, sautéing or baking results in cooked tuna with a dry texture.

Through experimentation, I found that poaching small pieces of tuna in olive oil creates a moist, tender texture and the fresh flavor desired.

The tuna absorbs very little oil, but the oil absorbs a fishy taste and should not be reused.

Oil Poached Tuna

1/2 cup olive oil
1 pound tuna cut into chunks

In a very small pot, heat oil to a simmer over medium-low heat. Cook a few chunks at a time for 3-5 minutes. The tuna should be just pink in the middle.

Remove to paper towels or brown paper bags to drain. Discard oil after all tuna is cooked.

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Tricks and Tips

Although apricots do not grow locally, it is easy to make a quick jam out of whole dried apricots or dried apricot paste.

Dried Apricot Jam

Place dried apricots in a pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil, simmer until soft, puree in blender, return to pot, sweeten if desired and simmer until thick. Place in jars, refrigerate and eat within 2-3 weeks.

Almond Apricot Bars

INGREDIENTS

- 1 stick unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1 teaspoon each vanilla and almond extract
- 3 cups almond meal
- 1/2 teaspoon each salt and baking powder
- 1 cup each apricot jam and toasted almond slivers (not slices)
- 2-3 Tablespoons honey

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly butter an 9 inch x 13 inch baking pan.
- Cream butter with sugar, then add eggs one at a time. Mix in extracts and set aside.
- Mix together almond meal, salt and baking powder.
- Fold dry mixture into butter mixture until completely blended. Spread batter into prepared pan and smooth lightly. Bake 25-30 minutes, until center springs back when pressed.
- Cool in pan. When completely cool, spread top of pastry with jam, sprinkle with almonds and drizzle with honey.
- Cut into squares and serve immediately. Cover leftovers and eat within 3 days.