

# Hogtown HomeGrown

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## Grits, greens and gravy—part three

When I was a little girl, I loved fried chicken. Chicken pieces, with the skin, shaken in a paper bag with salt, pepper and flour, were shallow fried in a big pan until golden brown and crunchy. Most of the time the pan was filled with just vegetable oil, but sometimes heaping spoonfuls of bacon drippings (from the coffee can next to the stove) were added to the oil, enhancing the flavor of the chicken.

The next day we would eat fried chicken cold. On the night it was made, if we were lucky, it was served with milk gravy. Flour was added to a few tablespoons of the drippings, mixed with the crispy bits left in the pan, milk was then stirred in and the gravy would simmer until thick and luscious.

Milk gravy never went on top of the chicken—why ruin the perfectly crunchy skin? In some homes, a volcano-sized well was scooped out in the center of a mound of mashed potatoes and filled with the rich gravy. In our house, as a nod to Granny's South Carolina roots and my Dad's lifelong love affair with rice, the gravy was ladled onto a mound of rice. Now this was not just a drizzle of gravy. The rice would float. I remember using a spoon so I wouldn't miss a drop.

The French may have sauces of every variety, but give me Southern gravy every time. My first choice would always be milk gravy, with or without the chicken. My mom's favorite is the giblet gravy served every Thanksgiving. Made with the turkey's heart, liver and giblets, drippings from the roasting pan and turkey broth made by boiling the organs with the neck bones. It was eaten in our family with pieces of boiled egg added just before serving. Served for breakfast, sausage gravy, now found everywhere including fast food restaurants, was ladled over split biscuits creating a hearty combination that would fill every nook and cranny until the next meal came along.

An old Southern tradition, red-eye gravy, was one of Granddaddy's favorites. I never thought of it as a gravy, since it was thin and watery, tasting mostly of salt. When it cooled, the fat would pool, creating little red eyes on the top. Granny made it by cooking a slice of salty cured, but not smoked, country ham in a frying pan until the fat was rendered and the ham essence released. The ham was removed and a quantity of black coffee equal to the fat and ham essence was added to the hot pan. The pan was then scraped to release all the bits stuck to it and the gravy was boiled for a minute or two to reduce the volume. It was usually poured over grits, but since Granddaddy really didn't like grits, he had it right on top of the ham and used biscuits to sop up the juices.

Tomato gravy, not to be confused with Italian tomato sauce, has Southern roots and a Cajun flair. Hot bacon drippings are combined with flour to make a light-colored roux for flavor and thickening. Fresh tomatoes and sometimes milk or water are added to the roux creating a gravy that can be served over grits, rice, biscuits or fish. Unconfirmed sources say that Florida Crackers sometimes referred to this as red eye gravy, but I'm not sure I trust Wikipedia enough to state that as a fact.

For poor Southerners, stretching a little bit of meat to feed a large number of people was easy—just make gravy! For the Florida Crackers trying to survive on grits and greens, gravy provided a little protein from whatever meat they had on hand, but also the fat they needed to keep hunger at bay. You can't satisfy a hungry family with one small piece of ham, but serve a bite of ham in a pool of gravy on top of grits with a side of greens and you've got a meal.

When I became a vegetarian, the love of gravy never left me, so I created new recipes. Instead of giblet gravy at Thanksgiving, we now have Tamari Mushroom Gravy poured over our Cornbread Dressing or mashed potatoes. While sausage gravy made with pork was never a big part of my childhood, I now make a vegetarian version with onions, soy sausage and herbs which makes breakfast stick to your ribs for hours, if not days. I tried to replicate my favorite milk gravy without the chicken, but it was hopeless. Sometimes the best food memories should just remain memories!

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**Sweet Potato Pone**

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## What's Fresh Right Now?

### Beets

**Bok Choy**—ming

### Broccoli

### Brussels Sprouts

**Cabbage**—green/red, napa, savoy

**Carrots**—orange/white/yellow

**Cauliflower**—white/green/purple, romanescu

### Chard

**Citrus**—grapefruit, sweet/sour oranges, tangelos, juices, lemons, tangerines, kumquat, calamondin

**Cucumbers**—mini seedless

**Garlic**—chives, gar-leeks

**Greens**—kale, collards, mustards, turnip, dandelion, sorrel, spinach

**Herbs**—parsley, cilantro, lemongrass, thai lime, dill, rosemary, oregano, spearmint

### Honey

**Kale**—white russian, tuscan

### Kohlrabi

**Lettuce**—arugula, butter, green/red leaf, red/green romaine, mix

**Microgreens**—assorted

**Mushrooms**—shiitake

**Onions**—green, yellow

**Peas**—sugar snaps

**Peppers**—red/green/yellow sweet bell, poblano, jalapeno, variety hot

**Potatoes**—small red, white/orange sweet

**Radish**—globe, daikon, french breakfast, watermelon

**Shoots**—pea, sunflower, corn, spring mix, broccoli, radish, arugula

### Sprouts

### Strawberries

**Tomatoes**—grape, green, red beefsteak, heirloom

### Turnips

## Local and Fresh—

## Cauliflower

White or green, round or fractal, cauliflower is a powerhouse of taste and nutrition. Look for unblemished, tight florets and store covered in the refrigerator. Cook lightly to avoid the sulphur smell or eat raw within a day or two of purchase. The colors and types are interchangeable, tasting and cooking just the same. Try it steamed and mashed with butter and salt as a substitute for mashed potatoes.

## Cheesy Cauliflower Soup with a Kick

### INGREDIENTS

1 head cauliflower, broken into florets  
1 cup chopped carrots  
2 Tablespoons chopped red onion  
2 Tablespoons olive oil  
1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper  
1/4 teaspoon mace or nutmeg  
1/4 teaspoon dry mustard powder  
3 Tablespoons flour  
3 cups milk  
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste  
1/4 cup chopped scallions  
1 cup grated sharp cheddar

### DIRECTIONS

Sauté cauliflower, carrots and onion in a dry pot over medium-high heat until cauliflower begins to caramelize in spots.

Add olive oil and sauté until veggies are tender.

Sprinkle cooked veggies with spices and flour. Stir to combine.

Add milk. Cook, stirring often, until thickened. Season to taste. Cover and simmer over low heat until bubbly – about 5 minutes.

Remove from heat and mix in scallions and cheese. Stir well, cover, and let sit for 5 minutes to melt the cheese. Stir again and serve.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

# Blackened Shrimp

## INGREDIENTS

- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes (adjust to taste)
- 1 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme leaves
- 1 teaspoon dried basil leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano leaves
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder (not garlic salt)
- 3 teaspoons smoked sweet paprika
- 1 pound of peeled shrimp (tails on or off, as desired)
- 1 Tablespoon olive oil
- 1 Tablespoon unsalted butter

## DIRECTIONS

Grind all dry ingredients together with a mortar and pestle or in a bowl with the back of a spoon. Pour this seasoning mixture into a brown paper bag.

Place all the shrimp in the paper bag with the seasoning mixture and toss until completely coated.

Heat a large heavy skillet over medium-high heat and add oil. Just as oil begins to smoke, swirl in butter carefully—it will splatter.

Place shrimp in pan in handfuls and, once they are all in, use tongs to spread them out in a single layer. Cook until just pink. Don't walk away from the stove since it only takes about 3-5 minutes. Quickly turn each shrimp over and cook an additional 3-5 minutes.

Serve as an entrée over grits or rice with a spoonful of the spicy "pan drippings."

# Blackened Shrimp Bruschetta

## INGREDIENTS

- 16 baguette slices, grilled or toasted
- 1 cup Tomato Jam, room temperature (recipe in May 2011 issue)
- 16 hot Blackened Shrimp (tails removed)
- 1 cup chevre

## DIRECTIONS

Spread each baguette slice with 1 tablespoon of Tomato Jam. Place a Blackened Shrimp on each and crumble 1tablespoon of chevre over the top.

Serve immediately. Leftovers do not store well.

### Tricks and Tips

I love using smoked sweet paprika in recipes. Like cumin, the taste is deep and woody. Unlike cumin, it enhances rather than overpowers the other ingredients to create a balance of flavors. So, what is paprika? It is simply a powder made by grinding dried sweet or hot peppers. Hungarian or sweet paprika (that dusting of red you often find on the top of deviled eggs) is usually made from sweet peppers and has a very neutral flavor. Take the same peppers and smoke them, usually with oak, and the result is smoked paprika, also known as Spanish paprika. Spanish paprika is a must for paella and can be sweet, hot or a combination, depending on the peppers used to make it. Buy your paprika in small amounts and store in an airtight container in a cool dry place.

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### Tricks and Tips

Biscuits require a very light touch. Use all purpose or whole wheat flour—bread flour has too much gluten. The dough should be soft, even though it makes it hard to handle. The result is a tender finished product. Stir lightly, add extra flour sparingly, and handle as little as possible. Use your hands to pat the dough flat, not a rolling pin.

## Sweet Potato Cornmeal Biscuits

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup whole wheat flour
- 1/2 cup cornmeal
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons very cold butter
- 1/2 cup cooked, mashed sweet potato
- 1 cup buttermilk

### DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a cookie sheet with parchment.

Mix together dry ingredients. Cut butter into small pieces and lightly work into dry ingredients with your fingertips. Mixture should be sandy, with pea-sized pieces.

Mix together sweet potato and buttermilk. Using a large fork, stir into dry ingredients. Lightly work into a rough ball. Pat onto a floured surface until about 1/2 inch thick. Cut out biscuits.

Bake in preheated oven for 15-18 minutes, until lightly browned. Serve hot.