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Have grits — will travel

Even though he was from New Hampshire, my dad loved grits. Corn grits weren't on his table growing up. His family ate traditional Syrian and Lebanese food which featured rice and bread. So there he was, nineteen and rail-skinny, eating breakfast in the mess hall at Fort Benning, near Columbus, Georgia. It was love at first bite—and it was a savory bite, with salt and butter. Since he was in the South, sugar or syrup never touched his grits.

And Mom? Well, Mom's from Georgia and grew up eating both grits and rice. Hattie, the woman who worked for them when Mom was little, didn't make grits during the week, but Granny took the time to cook a batch for weekend breakfasts. She always used plain white grits, cooked low and slow in water until creamy, flavored with salt and butter.

Mom married Dad and, in the early years, their weekend grits were served simply with butter and salt, but they were always thick. Dad believed that grits shouldn't need a bowl; they should have enough surface tension to hold their shape on a plate. Once we moved to Wisconsin, America's Dairyland, cheese began to find its way into a few family staples, most notably grits and mashed potatoes—always yellow and always sharp. It was later that Dad's experiments created a gourmet's delight with fresh garlic, sharp yellow cheddar and hot sauce. Though Dad's been gone more than 11 years now, I still make grits with garlic and cheese, and a splash or two of hot sauce.

Good grits are stone ground. There was a time you could find paper bags of local or regional stone ground corn and grits in grocery stores. No longer, but we have found some good grits in our local stores; look for cloth bags of unbolted white grits. There are yellow grits as well, but they remind me of polenta, so, like my Granny, my grits are white.

Now I don't just make grits on weekends and I definitely don't just make them at home. Since I know what I like, a few years back I began traveling with a bag of grits after I went to a grocery store to stock up for a week in a cabin and all they had were quick and instant grits. (One's like sawdust and the other makes you wish for sawdust.) So now I either pack a bag or mail it ahead—a Girl Scout is always prepared.

It is so easy to mail a box to yourself with things that take up too much room in your suitcase, like grits and coffee, or liquids you can't take on a plane, like jams and honey. Through the years, I have shipped boxes to vacation locations from San Francisco to Cape Cod. This lets me make one of our favorite dishes, shrimp and grits, for friends and family.

Last fall, Jeff and I traveled, with a bag of grits, to Nashville where I cooked for a small weekend gathering of women. When looking at the menu of shrimp and grits for Sunday night, one participant from Southwest Florida declared, "I don't eat grits, but I'll try!" Sanibel Sue is now a convert. Even though she has tried them elsewhere, she is steadfast in her assertion that she only likes my grits.

I just packed up another bag of grits, along with three kinds of Strongtree Coffee, homemade jam and samplers of Cross Creek honey, into a box headed to Paris. Forty years of marriage is quite the adventure, so Jeff and I are starting the next forty with a trip to find art, gardens and food in abundance. Our landlord/hosts plan to treat us with madeleines and canelés and we will reciprocate with a meal of shrimp and grits. Everything will be sourced from the local markets—except, of course, the grits.

What's Fresh Right Now?

Bananas

Beans—green, purple/green yard long

Bitter Melon

Cucumbers—kirby

Eggplant—fairytale, purple asian

Garlic—chives

Ginger

Greens—collards, kale

Ground Cherries

Herbs—parsley, cilantro, curry leaf, italian/lemon/thai basil, mint, thyme, tulsi

Honey—orange blossom, gallberry, wildflower, tupelo

Legumes—shelled white acre/creamer peas, butter beans/small lima beans

Moringa

Mushrooms—shiitake, white/blue/yellow oyster, lion's mane, trumpet, dried shiitake

Okra

Onions—green, sweet

Pac Choy

Papaya—green, ripe

Peanuts—green, boiled

Pears

Peppers—green/red/purple bell, shishito, jalapeno, datil, cherry bomb, serrano, poblano, anaheim, banana, cayenne

Persimmons

Pineapple

Potatoes—red/white

Roselle

Shoots and Sprouts

Squash—green zucchini, yellow crookneck/summer, kabocha, spaghetti, butternut, calabaza, seminole pumpkin

Sweet Potatoes

Tomatoes—cluster, heirloom, grape, sun gold, yellow/red plum

Turmeric

Putting Food By

Roast an oven full of hard squash while they are in season.

Puree cooked squash and freeze in 2-4 cups batches.

Label, date and freeze. Eat within 12 months.

Defrosted squash may be used the same as freshly-cooked.

Local and Fresh— Calabaza Squash

Commonly found around North Central Florida, calabaza are a hard-skinned winter squash related to Seminole pumpkins. Shaped like a pumpkin, a gourd or a butternut squash, calabaza are characteristically identified by green-streaked skin and dark orange flesh.

These pumpkins are suited for extended storage. Choose firm squash with long healthy stems and store in a cool dark place.

Traditionally, calabaza is a generic name for pumpkins so my recipes for calabaza will refer to them as pumpkins. Most pumpkin recipes may also be made with butternut squash.

Pumpkin Wedges— Three Ways

INGREDIENTS

1 calabaza or pumpkin, 3-4 pounds

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Place whole pumpkin in a baking pan with sides. Pierce the pumpkin in 2 or 3 places. Roast until it can be dented with a finger.

Cool slightly. Cut pumpkin in half and scoop out seeds. Cut pumpkin into wedges.

Prepare and add topping.

Serve hot. Refrigerate leftovers.

Spicy Lime Honey: Zest/juice of two limes, 1/4 cup honey, Pinch each salt and cayenne
Combine ingredients. Drizzle on wedges.

Shallot Thyme Butter: 4 Tablespoons softened unsalted butter, 1 Tablespoon minced shallot, 2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves, Pinch salt
Combine ingredients. Between two pieces of waxed paper, pat flavored butter into 1/2 inch thick rectangle. Refrigerate. Cut chilled butter into pieces and place on hot squash wedges.

Parmesan and Pepper: 1/2 cup finely grated parmesan cheese, freshly ground black pepper
Sprinkle parmesan directly onto squash wedges. Top with pepper.

Pumpkin Vegetable Soup

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons olive oil
1-2 shallots, chopped (about 1/2 cup)
1 cup mushrooms, chopped
2 stalks celery, halved lengthwise and chopped
2 carrots, quartered lengthwise and chopped
1 cup grape tomatoes, halved crosswise
1 cup green beans, chopped
1 cup potatoes, cooked and diced
2 Tablespoons tomato paste
6-8 sprigs of fresh thyme OR 1 teaspoon dried thyme
4 cups no-chicken or veggie broth
4 cups water
4 cups calabaza, pumpkin, butternut, acorn or hubbard squash, cooked
Salt and freshly ground pepper or cayenne pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS

Heat oil in a large covered pot over medium heat.
Add shallots and stir well. Cook 2-3 minutes.
Add mushrooms, celery and carrots. Stir well to coat with oil and cook 5 minutes.
Stir in grape tomatoes, green beans and potatoes. Cook 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.
Push the cooked veggies to one side of the pot and place the tomato paste in the space created. Stir paste while it cooks for one minute.
Add the thyme, broth and water. Stir well and bring to a boil. Cover, lower heat and simmer 15 minutes.
Stir in cooked squash. Cover and cook another 15 minutes.
Stir well. Use a potato masher to smooth out any squash lumps.
Taste and adjust seasoning as desired.
Serve immediately or let simmer over lowest heat until ready to serve.
Serve hot.
Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

VARIATIONS

Smooth and Sherried—add 1/4 cup sherry with the thyme. When soup is completely cooked, let cool for 30 minutes. Puree entire batch of soup until smooth and return to pot to reheat. If desired, top each portion with an additional 1/2 teaspoon sherry.

Chunky Stew—cut all veggies into 1-2 inch pieces. When soup is completely cooked, remove 3 cups and puree in blender. Return to pot and stir well to incorporate.

Pumpkin Parmesan Soup

INGREDIENTS

1 Tablespoon olive oil
1 shallot, minced
4-6 sprigs fresh thyme
1/4 teaspoon salt
4 cups pumpkin, roasted and pureed
4 cups veggie broth
2 cups water
1/2 cup parmesan, finely grated

DIRECTIONS

Heat olive oil in a large covered pot over medium heat.

Stir in shallot and cook until lightly golden.

Add thyme and salt. Cook one minute, stirring constantly.

Add pumpkin, broth, and water. Stir, bring to a simmer and cover. Cook 15 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent sticking.

Serve hot with a generous helping of parmesan on top.

Refrigerate leftovers.



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Local and Seasonal Recipes, Menus and More

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Look for my latest column in Gainesville Magazine!

Tricks and Tips

Cheddar cheese is not the only cheese that tastes great in grits, but it is definitely what we expect. Sharp cheddar works best since it melts to a creamy consistency, unlike mild and medium, which are not aged as long and melt into chewy strings.

Parmesan or Parmigiano Reggiano has great flavor, but a little goes a long way. It is great sprinkled on top or as part of a blend.

Monterey Jack melts well but the non-distinctive taste works best when mixed with other cheeses.

Smoked cheddar or gouda are delightful.

Grits—Three Ways

INGREDIENTS

- 4 cups cool water
- 1 cup white stone ground grits, dry
- 1/2-1 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup milk
- 2 Tablespoons unsalted butter
- 8 ounces sharp cheddar cheese
- 2-5 cloves garlic, chopped fine or coarse as desired
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 2-5 shakes of hot sauce of choice, optional

DIRECTIONS

Stir grits into water in a deep pot over medium heat. Bring to a boil, stirring occasionally. Let boil for a minute or two, then reduce the heat as low as it will go. Stir well and cover. Cook 45 minutes, stirring occasionally. It will stick a little.

When everything is nice and creamy, stir in a 1/2 teaspoon of salt. Add the milk stirring well. Cover and cook 5 minutes.

Add the butter and stir until melted. Cover the pot and cook 5 minutes, until thick. Taste and adjust salt, keeping in mind that any cheese used will add salt as well.

Butter and Salt

Serve as is from the pot or get fancy and place a pat of butter on top of each serving.

Cheddar Cheese

Stir in cubed or shredded cheese, stirring well. Cover, remove from heat and let the heat of the grits melt the cheese without cooking it. Stir well again and serve.

Dad's Gourmet Delight

Add the garlic with the butter and cook 10-15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the cheese as directed above. Add the pepper and hot sauce just before serving or serve alongside.