

Shrimp 'n Grits

Low country comfort food

By Anne Sears Mooney

Few southern comforts equal

a bowl of creamy, steaming grits, swimming in butter, with maybe some good sharp cheddar cheese melted in. Pair this with fresh shrimp cooked with bacon or a little Tasso ham, and you have what one expert calls “the totemic dish of the South.” Shrimp ‘n grits, a low country feast any time of day or night, is the backbone of the Hunt Breakfast, which is served when the hungry hunters return—no matter what time it is. Variations of this dish probably date back to the early European settlers, who were introduced to ground maize, native fish and game by the indigenous people who welcomed them to the New World.

The cultivation of maize in the Americas dates as far back as 3500 B.C. The Incas of Peru, the Mayas and Aztecs of Mexico, the Mississippi mound builders, the cliff dwellers of the American southwest and many nomadic tribes of North and South America all depended on maize as a dietary staple.

Columbus brought maize back from the New World, and within a generation it was being grown in southern Europe. Corn was a generic term referring to grain of any kind. The use of the word corn to denote maize is peculiar to North America.

Corn is a fundamental food plant of the United States. According to Betty Fussell, in her book *The Story of Corn*, today’s high-yield hybrid corn plants produce more different materials than any other cereal. In addition to feeding our livestock, grits, cornmeal and fresh corn provide human food. Fermented corn mash produces drinkable whiskey, as well as alcohol and acetone for industrial use. Corn flour is used in fabric sizing and soap, corn starch in plastics and dyes. Corn syrup sweetens candies and desserts. Corn oil is used not only in foods, but also in paint and varnish. Corn stalks and leaves become paper, and cobs are a cork substitute and can be used for fuel.

The efficient 20th-century corn hybrids largely supplanted the heirloom varieties, which came close to extinction. With the emergence of the whole food movement in the 1960s and 1970s, however, artisanal millers sought out seed from the heirloom varieties and have fostered the restoration of sweet mill corn, bred to ripen and dry in the field. Heirloom varieties are more difficult to grow than the high-yield hybrid commodity varieties. Heirloom corn requires separation between the plants, yielding less corn per acre. At the same time, it needs community. Fewer than 100 plants in a field, and they will not pollinate properly

and will eventually die. Heirloom corn also ripens unevenly and must be harvested by hand.

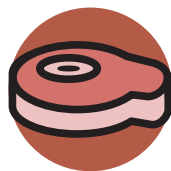
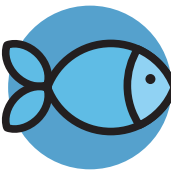
Anson Mills in Charleston, S.C., Falls Mill in Belvedere, Tenn., Morgan Mill in Brevard, N.C., and other artisanal millers have been producing stone ground cornmeal and grits made from heirloom “dent” and “flint” corn varieties. The classic Southern dent corn, so-called because of the dents at the tops of each kernel, are naturally soft, making them perfect for grinding into corn mash for whiskey, and into grits.

These grits are completely different from the library paste many of us were raised on. Grits that come in round boxes are processed on steel roller mills, which eliminate most parts of the corn kernel that provide nutrients and flavor. With the elimination of the living components of the corn in the milling process, the shelf life increases exponentially. In fact, grits processed this way will be around long after those round boxes have disintegrated into dust.

The “new” grits (actually, the “old” grits) made from heirloom corn are ground on slow-turning stones that slice the grain rather than crushing it. Much of the germ is retained, and with it, the flavor. The slow milling process also means the corn kernels are not subjected to the high temperatures produced by the friction of the roller mills, which further degrade the flavor and nutrients of the grain. Stone-ground grits are made from living corn, and they will spoil unless frozen or refrigerated. They also require considerably longer cooking time—up to an hour or more, depending upon how the corn is processed. This is slow cooking at its best, and a wise investment of time. The texture and flavor of stone-ground grits bears little resemblance to the uniformly textured, flavorless gruel that has, until recently, passed for grits.

The polenta of northern Italy and southern Austria is very similar to our grits. Explanations of the difference between polenta and grits vary, depending upon whom you ask. According to Anson Mills Director Glenn Roberts, the difference between grits and polenta has to do with the type of corn used, and the two types are very different. Differences in color also stem from the difference in corn. Simply put, white grits and polenta are made from white corn; yellow grits and polenta are made from yellow corn.

Ask May Bishop, 80, owner and operator of Morgan Mill in Brevard, N.C., and she will tell you, “The only difference between polenta and grits is in the price. “People are willing




to pay more for polenta than they are for grits.” May prefers the flavor of grits made from yellow corn and says that when people call requesting polenta, she offers them finely ground yellow grits. May’s customers are loyal and they love her yellow polenta.

Although stone ground grits are occasionally available in some health food or specialty grocery stores, the surest way to get fresh stone-ground grits and corn meal is to order by mail or over the Internet. Whatever planning and forethought is required is well worth the effort. You can smell the difference as soon as you open the package—and the sweet, nutty corn flavor is unrivaled.

It is no surprise that heirloom grits have found their way onto the menus of some of the most celebrated chefs in this country—notably Charlie Trotter of Chicago, Thomas Keller of the French Laundry in California and Donald Barickman of Magnolia’s in

Charleston, S.C. The sweet, roasted, floral corn flavors of these grits pairs well with all manner of fish, meat and game.

Although grits pairs beautifully with just about any shellfish, serve it with shrimp and you’ve got that proverbial love-and-marriage-horse-and-carriage Lowcountry match made in heaven. There may be as many versions of shrimp ‘n grits as there are folks who make it. The pairing of basic ingredients is such a natural one that improvisation in the kitchen is almost a given. The essentials are that the shrimp be the freshest you can find and not over-cooked, and that the grits be stone-ground from the heirloom corn varieties.

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Basic Grits

From John and Jane Lovett of Falls Mill, Belvedere, Tenn.

- 1 cup stone-ground grits
- 2 cups water for soaking
- 2 cups water or chicken broth
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon butter

Method: Place 1 cup grits in a bowl. Cover with 2 cups water and stir. When the light bran rises to the top, carefully pour or skim off the water and bran, reserving the grits in the bowl. Rinse again, if desired.

In a heavy-bottomed saucepan, bring 2 cups water or broth, salt and butter to a boil. Stir in grits. Boil for one minute, stir, then reduce heat to low and simmer covered for about 20 minutes. Stir occasionally until grits are thick and creamy. If grits become too thick during cooking, thin them out with a little water, milk or cream.

Four half-cup servings



LEW ROBERTSON

Easy Cheese & Garlic Grits

Adapted from John and Jane Lovett of Falls Mill, Belvedere, Tenn.

- One recipe basic grits, see above.
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 4 ounces sharp cheddar cheese, grated
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1/2 cup heavy cream or half and half
- salt and pepper to taste
- Bacon & chives for garnish (optional)

Method: Cook 1 cup stone-ground grits according to basic recipe. When grits has thickened to the consistency of thick oatmeal (it should hold its shape when spooned), add garlic, grated cheese, butter and cream or half and half. Correct seasoning. Stir well until cheese melts. Garnish with bacon and chives. Serve hot.

Four half-cup servings



MARK THOMAS



Anson Mills Carolina Grits & Shrimp

Serve these shrimp over basic grits or easy cheesy grits.

- 1 pound medium shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 2 tablespoons onion, minced
- 1 tablespoon red bell pepper, finely diced
- 2 ounces Tasso or other good country ham, finely diced
- 2 ounces butter
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon snipped chives
- 6 dashes Tabasco
- salt and pepper to taste

Method: When grits are done, in a heavy skillet over medium heat, cook onion, red bell pepper and ham in 2 ounces butter until onions are translucent. Add cream and Tabasco, stir to deglaze pan, then simmer until sauce is reduced by half. Add shrimp, stirring constantly, and simmer until shrimp have turned pink and have begun to curl. Do not over cook. Add chives, correct seasoning and spoon shrimp and sauce over hot grits. Serve at once.

Six servings.



ERICKA MCCONNELL

Although grits pairs **beautifully** with just about any shellfish, serve it with **shrimp** and you've got that proverbial love-and-marriage-horse-and-carriage low country **match made in heaven.**

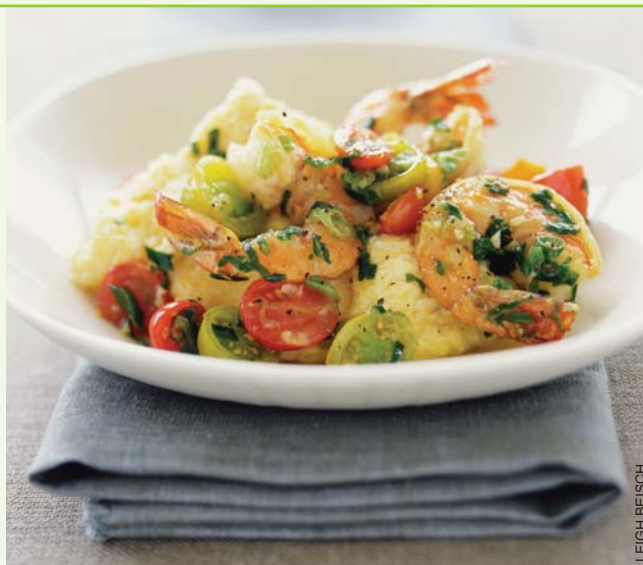
Falls Mill Shrimp & Grits

Serve these shrimp over basic grits or easy cheesy grits.

- 1 pound shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- Cajun or Old Bay Seasoning to taste
- 1 fresh tomato finely diced
- 3 slices bacon, crumbled

Method: When the grits are done and resting, cook bacon until crisp. Set aside. Pour off bacon grease and add butter to the pan. When foam subsides, add garlic and Cajun or Old Bay seasoning. Stir to mix. Add shrimp and saute in seasoned butter just until shrimp turns pink and begins to curl. Be careful not to over cook. Serve over basic grits or cheese grits. Garnish with crumbled bacon and diced fresh tomatoes.

Four servings.



LEIGH BEISCH

Sources for Heirloom Grits

Anson Mills

1922-C Gervais Street
Columbia, SC 29201
803-467-4122
www.ansonmills.com

Falls Mill

134 Falls Mill Road
Belvedere, TN 37306
931-469-7161
www.fallsmill.com

Morgan Mill

201 Morgan Mill Road
Brevard, NC 28712
828-862-4084