

What you need to know about grits - History and Cooking Tips

The Grits Tradition

In Antebellum times all great kitchen gardens on Charleston plantations were built on the Native American model of multiple sweet and mill corn varieties, intercropped with fruits and vegetables and medicinal plants and herbs. Sweet and mill corn were cross-bred every five years to produce outstanding grits corn--a tradition Carolinians took from Native Americans as well. The culture of corn and fresh grits, corn that passed between the stones of a hand mill straight from the garden and into a pot, survived unchanged in the fields and on the tables of Coastal Carolina well into the 20th century.

What did change was the quality and favor of grits produced from modern monocrop hybrids compared with grits produced from corn bred for taste, texture and nutrition.

The distinct corn varieties of Charleston's kitchen garden heritage--the best of which stayed close to their Native American antecedents--drew Anson Mills into heirloom farming and artisan milling. These "single family hand-selects" produce rainbow colors, grow up to 15 feet tall in the field, and possess varying hardness and kernel architecture depending on what they were bred for--fresh hand milling, parching over fire, or processing to hominy with potash. Most of them were recovered from retiring bootleg families who had good reason to hand select their own varieties--it allowed them to remain in business and out of jail.

As heirloom corn varieties disappear and fewer and fewer Carolinians engage in hobby cropping, Anson Mills acts as the sole repository for some of coastal Carolina and Georgia's most famous family corns.

White or Yellow?

Historically, white corn was popular in the urban port cultures of the South (Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, New Orleans) that were settled by Europeans with a predilection for white mill goods. Moving inland, through the rural American South, yellow corn and grits predominated.

White corns of the antebellum era were less intensely bred away from their Native American antecedents than yellow corns. This may explain why white corns, to this day, possess heightened flavors of the earth, and carry pronounced mineral and floral nuances.

Yellow corns fall to robust corn flavor in the front palate; the best of them show fine citrus flavor in the back.

Coarse or Quick?

Created in the tradition of stone ground hand mills of the antebellum era, the large particle size of Anson Mills coarse grits impart high texture and pronounced corn flavor. Coarse grits do take time to cook--an hour, at least--but are any cook's first choice as a stand-alone side dish or in the service of entrées like fish, greens, or eggs. They make beautiful grits cakes, too.

Anson Mills quick grits, on the other hand, have the whole corn richness and creaminess of our antebellum grits, but are milled somewhat finer. (Particle size is, after all, relative--the rest of the industry would call these grits coarse or "old-fashioned.") While it is true that any grain milled fine will finish with slightly diminished texture and flavor compared with that same grain milled coarse, Anson Mills quick grits have advantages that more than make up for this deficit. For one thing they can be on the table in 15 minutes. For another, their relatively fine, even texture allows for easy immersion in recipes for tamales, spoonbread and other Southern or Latin casserole cookery.

Milk or Water?

Around Charleston grits have historically been prepared using milk as the cooking medium--a Colonial tradition picked up from Italian engineers brought in to design rice fields. The proteins in milk coat the grits particles and make them slow to cook--a good thing, to some extent. Cooking grits with milk also requires more attention from the cook, as milky grits stick robustly to the bottom and sides of the pan. Milk softens the high and low flavors in the corn and make the finished dish a bit richer.

That being said we prefer to cook grits in water. Water is a neutral and less complicated medium for cookery. It allows the corn flavors to remain high and cooking to proceed unimpeded. A knob of cold butter whisked into a pot of finished grits makes their texture silky and embellishes their flavor just enough--but not too much. Why mess with perfection?

But not just any water

At its most basic, corn cookery combines water, grain and heat--three elements, countless iterations. In Native American corn cookery water source and quality were considered as important as the grains themselves. This tradition remains alive along the Carolina and Georgia coasts today, where the mildly alkaline water of Sea Island aquifers continues to be the preferred medium for cooking grits--and is shipped to expatriate kin for that purpose.

Because the quality of water is important in grits, rice and polenta cookery we recommend using spring or filtered water in our recipes. Bottom line: avoid tap water at all costs!