Anson Mills

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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, vegetables, medicinal plants, and herbs. Sweet and mill corn were crossbred every five years to produce outstanding grits corn, another tradition that Carolinians took from Native Americans.

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 flavor 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 a rainbow of 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 the most famous family corns in Coastal Carolina and Georgia.

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.
In their early efforts to breed corn, European settlers focused on yellow to increase per-acre yields for animal feed. Antebellum white corns, on the other hand, remained close to their Native American antecedents. This may explain why white corns to this day possess heightened flavors of the earth and carry more mineral and floral nuances than yellow corns.

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 makes 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 the cooking to proceed unimpeded. A knob of cold butter whisked into a pot of finished grits gives them a silky texture and embellishes them with just enough flavor—not too much. Why mess with perfection?

But Not Just Any Water

At its most basic, corn cookery combines water, grain, and heat—just 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 today along the Carolina and Georgia coasts, 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 the water used in grits, rice, and polenta cookery is important, we like to use spring or filtered water in our recipes.

Cooking Vessels

During the colonial era, grits were cooked in a heavy cast-iron pot with a round bottom to facilitate stirring and avoid sticking. Hearth cookware was heavy (pots might weigh 20 to 30 pounds) and excellent for distribution of heat and heat retention.

We have recently discovered that the best overall cooking vessel for all grits, coarse or quick, white or yellow, is a slow cooker.

For stovetop grits cookery we recommend a Windsor pot for quick grits and polenta (both of which cook uncovered). The Windsor's sloping sides and wide mouth provide an outstanding function unique to its design: They prevent, to a large degree, the spatter (corn napalm) that a simmering pot of grits or polenta will lob onto your range or, worse, onto you. Windsor pots also make for easier whisking and accelerated evaporation. We cook coarse grits in a heavy-bottomed saucepan with a tight lid.

Cooking to First Starch

For saucepan cooking you'll want to pay attention to the "first starch," the early stage of grits and polenta cookery in which fine corn particles thicken the liquid enough to hold the larger particles in suspension. It is crucial to stir constantly until the first starch takes hold and to reduce the heat immediately after it does so.

Both coarse and quick grits prefer low heat on the stove. Quick grits can forgive being rushed, but coarse grits cannot. Moderation is key: Once the "first starch" takes hold, all you should see are big, soft lazy bubbles on the surface every now and then. In a slow cooker the grits do not boil at all.