

Fresh Whole Hominy

Time: 4 to 5 hours to clear the limewater, overnight to soak the corn, and 5 ½ hours to cook the hominy

Pre-Columbian Americans regarded everything they grew and cooked as sacred and alive, and considered everything within their cooking sphere bound by nature and magic. At the moment a breeze swept ashes into a pot of corn simmering in spring water on the fire, magic became a prime ingredient. The water that cooked this corn, known as limewater today, gave the kernels fresh dimensions beyond the familiar flavor of sweet corn—it brought forth floral notes and layers of mineral and clove. But that's not all. The corn ground easily into meal and made flatbreads that were soft and pliable, not brittle. And those who ate the corn felt like a million bucks. That's how *we* like to tell the story.

Today, corn cooked by this method is called both nixtamal (a Mexican Spanish adaptation of an Aztec term), and hominy (anglicized Algonquin). Since you asked.

Its precise origins aside, early nixtamal cookery involved wood ash, water, and maize. Properly concentrated, wood ash and water form a naturally caustic chemical called potassium hydroxide (colloquially, potash) that dissolves pericarp (the cellophane stuff that gets stuck in your teeth when you eat popcorn) straight off the kernels. The kernels are left plump, naked as a baby, and infused with an intoxicating flavor that is part corn, part exotic spice, and part mysterious scents that seem to alert your primal sensors to anticipate exceptional nutrition. It is an authentic American flavor very few of us have experienced. But you can experience it now.

Fresh hominy can be used whole, as in hominy fried in brown butter and herbs, or ground into masa to make tortillas. It can be included as a bright accent in soups and stews or deep-fried to a supple yet crisp result. It also freezes well, maintaining its unique and exceptional character.

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need a medium enamel or porcelain-coated pot (such as graniteware), a fine mesh strainer, a wooden spoon, and a footed colander.

Cooking Remarks

Lime is caustic and should not come into prolonged contact with your skin. If you touch culinary lime in dry or liquid form, rinse the area with cold water. Rinse utensils and pots, and clean the sink and counters where culinary lime has been present.

Ingredients

5 pints (10 cups) spring or filtered water

1.6 ounces (1/3 cup) culinary lime

9 ounces (1 1/2 cups) Anson Mills Henry Moore Yellow Hominy Corn

Directions

1. Pour the water into a medium enamel or porcelain coated pot. Add the culinary lime and stir with a wooden spoon until dissolved. Bring the lime water to a rolling boil on high heat. Kill the heat and let the pot stand until the lime water has cooled, and has cleared, 4 to 5 hours.

2. After 4 or 5 hours there will be a thin, crisp lime skin on the surface of the water. The liquid beneath will be clear, and a layer of cloudy lime solids will hover over the bottom of the pot. Set a fine mesh strainer over a 4- to 7-quart mixing bowl. Lift the pot with limewater, tilt it gently, and pour the liquid through the strainer, leaving the cloudy solids in the bowl (the lime skin will remain in the strainer). Allow the solids to settle again, then decant more limewater into the bowl. Repeat this process until only about a cup of cloudy solids and water remains at the bottom of the pot. Pour the lime skin and solids down the drain and rinse the pot and sink well. Return the decanted lime water to the enamel or porcelain coated pot. Add the corn. Let settle, then skim off and discard any floating kernels. Bring to a boil over high heat. Cover and turn off the heat. Let the corn stand in the lime water at room temperature, covered, overnight.

3. Turn the pot on high heat and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to a low simmer. Simmer, covered, over low heat until the kernels are soft and chewy and have relinquished their skins, about 3 hours. To check for doneness, use a wooden spoon, to lift 2 or 3 kernels out of the water, and rinse them under cold running water. Taste a kernel. If done, it will be soft and ever so slightly chewy with a gel-like texture, but no hard, starchy center.

4. Remove the pot from the stove, and set it in the sink using potholders. Run hot water into the hominy to flush out any bits of pericarp (the cellophane-like skin that encases the kernels when they're raw), stirring with a wooden spoon, about 5 minutes. Turn the hominy into a footed colander and rinse under hot running water, rubbing the kernels between your palms. If you're using the hominy to make Spring-Water Masa Tortillas, go straight to the recipe, as the hominy must be used while it's still hot. Otherwise, cool the hominy, then turn it into an airtight container or large zipper-lock bag, and refrigerate until ready to use, up to 1 week, or freeze for up to 3 months.

Makes about 3 cups