

VILLAGE VIEW

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Ask any Southerner what he eats for breakfast and you'll hear mentioned "Grits." The first time I ate grits I wasn't much impressed; I've since found, however, that breakfast anywhere below the Mason-Dixon Line includes grits whether you want it or not and, because I hate to see food wasted, when grits are served, I chock them down.

In time, I've even come to like the stuff, and now look forward to a Southern Breakfast. Grits are good. One day while grocery-shopping, I spotted a package of grits in a local supermarket. Why not? So I added it to my basket and stored it in a cupboard when I got home.

Then came the winter of 80-81. Hitherto, in recent years, I've contented myself with juice, an egg, and coffee for breakfast, but this winter, I've felt the need of something more substantial. Cold cereals don't warm up. Why not make some grits? The basic recipe is on the package.

After a few dishes of grits along with my juice, egg and coffee, I found the combination of grits and egg on the plate is quite pleasant. I guess I'm basically lazy because I decided to cook the egg in the same pan with the grits- a whole new taste sensation. Instead of the grainy-mealy and somewhat-watery mass, I had a fluffy-but-firm concoction I liked even better.

Within a few days I learned to melt a teaspoon of butter in the cooking water and sprinkle all with salt and pepper after I'd served it. Tasty, hot and something solid in the tummy; nor was I ravenous by lunchtime. The final step toward improving grits, Southern Style, was to start with milk instead of water. A couple of ample servings of what I think is the best hot cereal ever, as well as fine one-dish breakfast, is now standard fare in this house.

Two cups of milk, two-thirds of a cup of grits, two eggs, two teaspoons of butter, a dash of salt and pepper, all in one pan, and ten minutes of cooking-time do the trick.

Heat milk, butter, and salt and pepper in the top of a double-boiler, almost to the boiling point, while water in the bottom of the double-boiler comes to a boil. Slowly pour the meal into the scalded milk, stirring constantly. Place top of double-boiler on bottom and continue stirring until meal starts to thicken (30 seconds). Break eggs into mixture, stir thoroughly, and clap on the cover. Turn off the heat and let things just sit there for ten minutes.

You'll be surprised at the volume. There's enough for three ample servings. It's thick, but not too thick. It's smoother than plain grits, but with just enough graininess to give consistency. It's light, but substantial. It can be eaten as it comes from the pan; it can be served with milk and sugar if preferred; if there's some left over, form cakes and fry those another time in a bit of butter or bacon fat.

I'm gung-ho for grits, Southern Style; but I'm absolutely SOLD on grits, Northern Style.

I got so interested in all this, I read the label on the package. Grits, it turns out, is hominy. Nothing indicated exactly what hominy is, so I looked it up in the dictionary. It's made from ground corn. Like corn meal, but coarser. And white instead of yellow. The next step, of course, is to try this technique with good old-fashioned corn meal. In fact, I've got some stone-ground corn in the refrigerator where I hope the weevils haven't found it.

And, just for the fun of it, I checked a couple of old cookbooks to see if earlier cooks had made anything similar. Here's a recipe for corn pone: Mix a cup of corn meal with ¼ cup of water, ½ t. salt and one T. melted butter. Spread thin on a greased pan and bake until dry and crisp.

There's Apple Jonnycake that calls for 2 T. sugar mixed with one T. melted butter; pour over this a cup of sour milk with one t. baking soda stirred into it. Then sift one cup of corn meal with ½ t. salt and ¾ cup flour, and add to liquids. Finally, add two large peeled, cored and chopped apples to the batter, pour into a greased pan and bake half-an-hour at 375°.

Then there's something called Southern Spoon Bread. Two cups milk, 1 cup corn meal, one t. salt, and four eggs. Heat milk, stir in the corn meal, cook to smooth mush. Remove from fire and add egg yolks, one at a time, beating after each. Whip the whites and fold them in carefully. Bake 30 minutes. I can see this would be much like my grits, Northern Style, but lighter, fluffier and richer. Bet it's delicious.

The further I looked into the subject the deeper I got into a collection of rules for good hearty stick-to-the-ribs corn-meal-cookery. In addition to the above, there are Carolina corn cakes, Spider corn cakes, batter breads, Indian breakfast cakes, Hoe cakes and Albany breakfast cakes, all using corn meal (white or yellow), eggs, milk, salt and shortening, in different proportions and doubtless with different results.

Although all seem simple, none are as easy as my one-pan breakfast of grits, Northern Style. It's quick, easy and wonderfully satisfying. I don't have to bake it. It cooks over boiling water, after the heat is off.

Just because I'm a stubborn Yankee female, however, tomorrow I'm going to try yellow corn meal instead of white hominy. From hints I picked up in the old books, I've a sneaking suspicion the addition of a tablespoon of molasses might make a tasty change of pace. (I'd skip the pepper, of course.)

And if that turns out a success, some other morning I might substitute a dollop of honey. Although I didn't see it suggested, molasses, honey, and maple syrup are sweeteners that can usually be used interchangeably for flavor variety in basic recipes.

This breakfast that's new to me may actually be a step

backward, a return to an era when the day's first meal was traditionally more substantial than juice, bacon 'n' eggs, toast and coffee. Maybe it's a change we're ready to make. I find myself looking forward to breakfast these cold mornings, and feeling hungry for the sensation of having something solid in my stomach to carry me through a morning's work.

There's nothing to stop you from having a similar experience. I only hope managers of local groceries are prepared for a run on corn meal and grits!