

It's Grits. They're Great. No Regrets

Grammar, which I seek to honor, caused writer's block when I first tried to write about grits, one of Colvin Run Mill's premier products. Which is correct: "grits are" or "grits is?" While the former sounds and probably is correct, an echo of my visits to Virginia in the 1950's whispered that the latter was more authentic.

The iconic, must-see 1978 film "[It's Grits](#)" showed me the way. The cameraman wanders around South Carolina asking people in parking lots, at bus stops and football games: "Do you eat grits?" (Some misunderstood the question as "Do you have any regrets?" but were quickly redirected as they begin to pour out their life's missed opportunities). Loud and proud "yeses." As to singular or plural? A mix. New York City residents responded to the same questions with unknowing, quizzical looks. Until the famous *New York Times* food critic and cookbook author Craig Claiborne fills the screen declaring he ate grits everyday growing up in Mississippi, "like mother's milk."

The cameraman follows Claiborne around his kitchen as he prepares his trademark grits soufflé (linking "grits" to "soufflé" provoked one *New Yorker* columnist to exclaim it was like putting a hat on a donkey) then pops the question: "Is it 'grits are' or 'grits is'?" Claiborne senses the trap, smiles, looks straight at the camera: "Grits are." The backlash was swift but gentle. A fellow Mississippian accused Claiborne of having fallen victim to Yankee malaise. After all, cornmeal, a finer cousin of grits, carries a singular verb as does oatmeal. He instructs Claiborne to repeat: "I like grits. It is good. I eat it whenever possible." I side with Claiborne.



With that grammatical block overcome, the way is clear to get to the gist of grits: What are they? Where did they come from? How are they used today?

Inevitably the question arises at the mill: What are grits? On grinding days, you can watch grits made before your very eyes. Corn is poured into the hopper, falls onto the shoe, is tapped into the eye of the running stone, ground, channeled into a hole, slides down a chute, and is shaken in a long trough covered by wire screens, understandably called the shaking sieve. Screens in the first part of the sieve have 14 holes per square inch that allows fine powder to escape: cornmeal. The next section has screens with eight holes per square inch, permitting a coarser fare to fall through: grits.



The sole ingredient: dried dent corn. Also called field corn, its name derives from the characteristic small dimple in the crown of each kernel. It is a hybrid of flint corn (multicolored, harder hulls, less starchy) and gourdseed corn (soft hull, flavorful) made popular in the late 1800's and accounts for nearly all corn production in the United States.

Old fashion grits are corn ground between cool stones that retain oil and nutrient rich germ and therefore are perishable (please refrigerate or freeze your grits) and are infinitely more flavorful than instant grits. For the latter, the corn has been run through warm steel rollers, deprived of its germ, pre-cooked, dehydrated, and infused with preservatives so it can wait patiently on the grocery store shelf for unwitting customers. Instant grits should not be confused with quick cooking grits which are more finely milled grits and, therefore, cook more quickly but are less toothsome. Hominy grits are made from corn soaked in lye which softens the hull so it can be easily removed. The kernels are dried and coarsely ground.

Where do grits come from? Archeologists have pinpointed the first cultivation of what we know as corn (technically *maize*, the term the Spanish conquistadors appropriated from the local term “*mahiz*”) in south central Mexico about 9,000 years ago. The plant looked nothing like what we



know today, sporting only one, one-inch ear per plant. Corn, is a cultigen, meaning it must be propagated. One strain drifted south to the Andean region where it was bred to have large, starchy kernels. About 2,000 years ago, the strain nurtured in Central America resembled flint corn, also called “Indian corn,” and made its way to North America.

Around 1,000 B.C. a curious Nahuatl Indian in Central America wondered what would happen if she boiled corn in water mixed with hardwood ash – combining the two results in lye which, mixed with oil, has cleaning properties (think soap). What happened? The hard hull of the kernel softened and could be easily removed. Drying the remaining kernel and grinding it produced masa, corn flour used to make that delicious filling in tamales and, much later, those filling tortillas. Soaking corn in lye is called “nixtamalization,” from the Nahuatl terms “nixtli” (ashes) and “tamalli” (cooked *maiz* masa).

Sir Walter Raleigh, the Pilgrims, and Captain John Smith were treated by their Indian hosts to boiled corn that was “very white, faire, and well tasted.” In 1629 Smith recorded the Algonquian name: “uskatahomen” (that which is ground), a short linguist leap to “hominy.” The Muskogee tribe’s preference was the straightforward boiled ground corn with a coarse texture the English called “gryyt” the term for any coarse meal (Old English “groot” – sand, gravel).

The subsequent use of these terms has been anything but straight forward, giving rise to untold confusion. At first grits and hominy meant the same thing. In the north hominy referred to the skinned kernels (available in cans at your local grocery store) while in the south hominy meant skinned kernels to make grits (hominy grits). The Big Easy developed its own lexicon: big hominy for whole kernels; little hominy for the ground goods.

Grits have been intertwined with America’s Southern culture, from the poor to the privileged. A nutritious, inexpensive food eaten simply or dressed for royalty. A few dollops of butter or rich gravy. Blended with egg, flour, and milk to conjure muffins or simply sweetened for dessert. Hominy and beans were considered fare for the poor but are highly nutritious thanks to nixtamalization which magically ramps up the corn’s calcium by a factor of 13 and unlocks vitamin B3 that converts food to energy. The combination creates a complete protein containing

all nine essential amino acids – a super charged health food. In the South Carolina low country near the coast the Gullah Geechee, slaves from West Africa, would receive grits as a food allowance and consume them with their daily catch of shrimp or fish.



1985 was the breakout year for grits in the north. Bill Neal, chef at Crooks Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina served his version of shrimp and grits – cheddared and parmesaned grits topped with bacon, mushrooms, and jumbo shrimp -- to that besotted grits lover, Craig Claiborne. Claiborne was enthralled, extracted the recipe from Neal, and published it in the *New York Times*. The south’s secret went viral.

Entire cookbooks have been devoted to an outrageous variety of shrimp and grits recipes. Jekyll Island Georgia hosts an annual Shrimp and Grist Festival (catch it Nov 2-4 this year). Tiny St. George, South Carolina, with the distinction of having the highest per capita consumption of grits, holds the World Grits Festival complete with grits eating and grits rolling contests, the former being about how much grits you can put inside your body, the latter is how much grits you can get to stick on the outside of your body outside after diving into a grits-filled tub! (Tip: wear a hooded sweatshirt inside out.)



Grits’ mild taste make them a perfect conveyance for many foods and flavors. The film “*It’s Grits*” shows the classic brushing melted butter on a mound of hot grits, but also more adventurous combinations, like dousing it with red-hot sauce, or blending it with peanut butter and salsa. My wife has been subjected to grits and gorgonzola, grits and meatballs with cream sauce, deviled grits with orange juice, as well as a classic shrimp and grits. She grits and bears it.

One purported drawback of grits is its time-consuming preparation. Constantly stirring grits and water or milk over a stove for forty minutes is necessary to avoid scorching the blend or having it become lumpy. Barbara Kafa’s *Microwave Gourmet* broke the spell – lump free, full portion of grits in 15 minutes! As the microwave zaps you can sauté the shrimp.

Interest in good grits has revived demand for stone-ground, traditional grits giving new life to small-batch artisanal mills like Anson and Geechie Boy (now called Marsh Hen). Heirloom grits like Jimmy Red have gathered a following as connoisseurs effuse over subtle differences in taste and texture, gushing over the “rich, smooth whiskey with honey-nut undertones” of Jimmy Red. Oglala Lakota chef Sean Sherman’s Owamni restaurant, named by the James Beard Foundation as the 2022 restaurant of the year, serves nixtamal (hominy).



How do Colvin Run Mill’s grits measure up to other artisanal mills? Being an enthusiastic supporter of Colvin Run Mill, I challenged a South Carolina native to a grits tasting. The challenge: she prepares her tasty shrimp and grits recipe with grits from Marsh Hen Mill, her childhood favorite, and our humble local product. No matter what the outcome, it will be grits. They will taste great. I will have no regrets.

