

Glorious Grits

Grits are a staple in Southern cooking. But, if you haven't tried them, you are missing out on a versatile and nutritious whole grain. Historically, grits are one of the first authentic American foods. The Muscogee indigenous peoples created grits by pounding or grinding dried corn with stones to make coarse cornmeal. Then, they cooked it into *safke*, which was like a soup or porridge.

Dried mature corn kernels are ground into small, coarse bits to make grits. Grits resemble polenta, but they are made of different types of corn, and the texture of polenta is more coarse. Another related product, farina, known in the U.S. as cream of wheat, is made from semolina flour.

For the record, corn is classified by the type of starch in its kernels. Dent corn, the premier corn in the South, has a relatively soft, starchy center that makes the best grits. Flint corn, used for polenta, has a hard, starchy endosperm and produces more granular cornmeal with a better texture.

Like all whole grains, grits have kernels with three main components: the hull, the germ, and the inner starch. The way the kernels are processed creates the different types of grits. The main types are stone-ground (also called old-fashioned), which are ground with the kernel's germ still intact, so it is the least processed and has the coarsest texture.

Another type is hominy grits, which have the hull and germ removed. They are processed by cooking in an alkaline solution before they are ground.

Regular grits have a medium grind. Quick grits are finely ground and cook faster. They are both processed to cook quickly and last longer on store shelves. Instant grits are pre-cooked and dehydrated. They are designed to be cooked by rehydrating with boiling water.

Nutritionally speaking, grits have a variety of vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. Grits provide an array of nutrients and are especially high in iron and B vitamins. Stone-ground types are more nutritious. One cup of cooked, regular grits has approximately 182 calories.

When grits are done cooking, they should be thick and smooth. Grits have a mild flavor and will take on the taste of whatever they are paired with when cooked. They are commonly made with butter, cheese, and added salt.

To store uncooked grits, put them in a sealed container and keep them in a dark place. Leftover cooked grits can be stored in the refrigerator for up to four days and reheated before eating.

When cooking grits, be sure to use enough water. Compare the quantity of the grits to the amount of water and be sure that every bit of dried corn will have sufficient liquid to hydrate and fully soften. A starting ratio of 4:1 by volume of water to grits is recommended. If the grits are not thoroughly cooked when thickened, more water should be added to create a 5:1 ratio to have a smooth pot of cooked grits.

The grits should be covered while cooking. Whisk and scrape every few minutes to prevent the grits from sticking or scorching on the bottom of the pan and lumps from forming.

Like oatmeal, each person has their preference for the “right way” to eat grits. Some may enjoy them runny with a grittier texture, while others want them completely stiff. Somewhere in the middle of the two choices, grits can be cooked in a way that results in smooth, creamy grits that have some movement, falling into a category somewhere between runny and stiff.

There are many ways to serve grits. In the South, grits are a typical breakfast food and are an excellent accompaniment for the traditional hot breakfast of eggs, bacon, and toast. Cheese grits are even known as comfort food in the South, similar to how we think of mashed potatoes.

Grits can be served as a side instead of potatoes, rice, or other grains. The combination of shrimp and grits is popular, and the shrimp could be substituted for any type of seafood for a meal. Grits with meat, such as beef or chicken, with a sauce or gravy are also delicious.

Grits can also be served with a vegan meal, paired with grilled vegetables or a Middle Eastern salad.

Grits are relatively simple to cook, inexpensive, and can be paired with countless other foods or enjoyed alone. I hope you will try grits if you haven't already.

(Sources: United States Department of Agriculture; www.seriousseats.com; www.thenibble.com)

Read more at: <https://www.thenibble.com/reviews/main/cereals/cheese-grits.asp>

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