

The history of cornmeal in American kitchens is of comfort, connection

By Rebecca Powers, Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.28.19

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Made from the author's family recipe, Edna's Cornbread was named for Rebecca Powers' grandmother. Photo by: Stacy Zarin Goldberg for The Washington Post

"It's a shame you don't have a food heritage," a woman once said to me at a dinner party.

The fellow guest had Hungarian roots. She seemed to be dismissing my generations-deep American tradition as bland.

I thought of how much I loved being called to dinner for my mother's cornbread and beans. Half the appeal was the dessert afterward: honey on warm, buttered cornbread.

Warm, Sweet Cornmeal

If you and your ancestors have lived in the Americas long enough, your DNA is dusted with cornmeal, an ingredient with Mesoamerican, Native American and African roots. The yellow and white kernels have passed through the hands of indigenous, or native, and enslaved people. They've been eaten by colonists and noted chefs. They have populated a food family tree that's anything but bland.

Cornmeal and its many kitchen creations — cornbread, mush, johnnycakes, spoon bread, spider bread, pudding — inspire strong allegiances.

Its most well-known result is cornbread. This treat can be had with or without sugar, part wheat flour or not, white meal or yellow, buttermilk or sweet.

What's important is that cornbread is a comfort food. Leftover bread, crumbled into a glass or bowl, soaked with milk or buttermilk, and drizzled with honey is an enduring favorite. "Corn cup" is what Nashville-based pastry chef and writer Lisa Donovan says her father called his regular glass of milk-doused, day-old cornbread.

Culinary historian Michael Twitty notes the hearty nature of the classic quick bread.

"My first solid food was cornbread mashed up in potlikker, the stock left over from a pot of Southern greens," Twitty writes in his award-winning book, "The Cooking Gene." That mixture, he says, is "the oldest baby food known to black people in America, going back to the days of slavery."

Not Just A Fixture In The South

Cornmeal and its creations are practically a religion in the South. Still, ground maize commands affection across the continent. In New England, Rhode Island claims johnnycakes, and in Boston, brown bread is made with the grains wheat, rye and cornmeal.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History is in Washington D.C. So is the National Museum of the American Indian. They both have cornmeal-based offerings in their restaurants.

In Detroit, Michigan, cornbread is a constant companion of soul food and barbecue. I fondly recall Friday lunches at Maxie's Deli in Detroit's old Irish neighborhood. Cops, reporters, high-society ladies and lawyers filled counter stools for a bowl of fish chowder. It was served with a hunk of fluffy cornbread and some conversation with the beloved owner.

Maxie's is no more. However, one recent morning, I sampled the cornmeal mush special at Zingerman's Roadhouse in Ann Arbor, Michigan. A waitress placed a bowl of soft, flecked mush, served with syrup, on my table. It was subtly sweet.

Local, Heirloom Varieties

The humble, rustic cornmeal is becoming even livelier. Millers and chefs are carefully on a quest to find, bring back, preserve, grind and cook heirloom varieties that were thought to be forever lost.

Greg Johnsman is founder of Geechie Boy Mill in Edisto Island, South Carolina. He says when you taste an heirloom that's local to your area, "It's like shaking your great-granddaddy's hand."

He and others who grow and mill old varieties discuss cornmeal like wine experts talk wine.

Glenn Roberts is founder of the organic, heirloom Anson Mills in South Carolina. He uses terms that wine experts often do when he describes certain cornmeals. Roberts lists tasting notes: "Floral, nuttiness, vanillin, stone fruit, spice nutmeg, cumin."

In North Carolina, David Bauer is founder and miller of the Farm and Sparrow Craft Mill and Collection of Grains.

Sometimes cornmeal is used in a bread dough and fermented with yeast or sourdough, he says. When this happens, "it steams the bread from the inside as the loaf bakes, giving off its distinct aromas and creating an extremely moist interior," Bauer, an experienced baker, explained. "If the dough is rolled in cornmeal or polenta, it creates a crackly, crunchy texture that smells like sweet popcorn."

Donovan suggests a relaxed approach when cooking with it.

"Start with someone else's recipe, but don't be afraid to play around," she says. "Throw some poblanos in there," she says. Poblanos are a mild chili pepper from Puebla, Mexico.

"My grandmother was of Zuni/Mexican descent," she adds. "I base a lot of food on my own personal history."

Ancestral Eating

In the Americas, cornmeal may be the most indigenous of ingredients. It has spiraled across regions and among ethnicities and races.

"Cornmeal, for me, is ancestral, historical; it's the starch of my people," Twitty told me recently. "It's associated with slavery. It's associated with hardscrabble — poverty and the frontier. But this is the food that fed Aztec and Mayan kings and African royalty."

Hunger for kinship has us walking through history museums and tracing our family trees using online software. However, that search for human connection might just begin and end in the kitchen.

As Johnsman says, "When you bring a skillet of uncut cornbread to the table, it just makes people so happy."