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Grits

This morning, I read in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* about some southern chefs who are participating in a stylish renaissance of grits. One of them, from Atlanta, stuffs artichoke hearts with stone-ground grits cooked in half-and-half, tops them with lobster chunks, and finishes them with a butter of pureed fresh mangoes, wine, bay, shallots, heavy cream, and Parmesan. I could only recall the humble grits dishes that I grew up with.

Although grits was not a constant part of our menu when I was a child, the plain dish, cooked in water, wasn't unusual either. I used to enjoy watching the pot bubble and pop. I was sometimes allowed to quiet the mixture by stirring to keep it from scorching, but I was always wary of having some of the popping mixture burn my hand. We liked it thick and creamy. It was what I now recognize as comfort food, the smoothness providing an agreeable graininess on the tongue. Mother nearly always prepared enough so that there was enough left over to pour into a loaf pan to the depth of a couple of inches. After cooling, it was covered and refrigerated overnight to provide a treat for the next evening meal. Mother made slices about half an inch thick and fried them in a small amount of hot Crisco. The resulting splattering and sizzling served to whet appetites and set taste buds tingling. The crisp texture was a lovely contrast to the soft dish of the night before.



During the first years that Paul and I were married, we lived in Portland, Oregon, and Takoma Park, Maryland, where I never saw grits on the grocery shelves. I'm sure there was none in the Pacific Northwest. The nation's eaters were not then as aware of regional foods as we are today. I'm sure that any of *our* Oregon friends would have been highly skeptical of a product like grits.

In fact, in 1949, when I rode a Greyhound bus from Dallas to Chapel Hill, I rediscovered grits at the same time that I found that the word was not well known outside the South or Southwest. My seat companion on that trip was a New York City woman who was returning from visiting her Army son in San Antonio. From her I discovered that the wonder of San Antonio was *not* the Alamo as I thought but the United Artists movie theater in downtown. She found the movie house with its Southwest decor the most impressive sight in San Antonio. Then when we stopped in a

small town in Georgia, she may well have found the most impressive aspect of her long journey from Queens and back. We had a breakfast break at a small cafe. She finished her eggs, bacon, and toast. Poking tentatively at a white mound on her plate, she asked its identity. "Grits," I replied. "Grits!" she exclaimed, "What do you do with it?" After she hesitantly tasted, she discovered that the taste appealed to her. Before I could eat any of the grits on my plate, she begged me to let her have it. We returned to the bus discussing the phenomenon: what it was, how it was made, how it was cooked. She wondered if she could find any in Queens. I doubted that she could, but I hope she remembered it long enough to try it fifteen or twenty years later when it might have appeared in her local grocery store.

Another interesting appearance of grits in my life came after we had returned to Dallas and the boys were old enough to make embarrassing observations. For some reason, perhaps lack of time or laziness, I seldom cooked grits except when we had house guests from some other part of the country. George informed one such guest that he loved grits but his mother never cooked it unless we had company. He got it more frequently after that! I assume I had been trying to educate people from other parts of the United States about an interesting staple in the southern diet. Sometimes we had it for breakfast, sometimes for dinner. I still feel that one of the best "company" dishes is cheese grits. My recipe is far too large for a small family. But much as I liked it, I fried it only once, discovering the disaster zone the frying created on the range top. What a mess to clean.

Years later after we moved to Richmond, one of my English department colleagues who was a linguist told me about his investigation of the "grits isophage" (*is* = equal, *phage* = one or thing that eats: to a linguist this combination meant areas in which one could expect to find grits, with accompanying predictable pronunciation phenomena). His personal research in non-chain restaurants in Richmond had convinced him that the grits isophage line zig-zags through the center of Richmond, with most restaurants south of that line automatically serving grits at breakfast but with grits not served on breakfast plates north of the line.

In today's Food Section, our local writer maintained that regular and quick grits are acceptable but that instant grits just does not taste right. She seemed to favor the simple cuisine I remember from my childhood. The fashionable culinary experts quoted by the other writer obviously specialize in gilding the lily. How about "Low Country shrimp paste mixed with warm grits and served with toast points," or "soft-shell crawfish napped with orange creole butter, resting on spicy grits cakes," or "garlic, jalapeno Monterey jack cheese, and half-and-half flavoring the grits under salmon that's grilled medium-rare and brushed with chili-flecked honey and tomato barbecue sauce"?