

Cornbread in Cast Iron

“Lord, I thank you for being born in the South;
and, for cornbread and turnip greens in my mouth.”
-anonymous

I would have to say that after politics and religion, cornbread recipes would take a close third as the source for heated arguments and strong opinions. Everybody has their own version, usually passed down through at least three generations and theirs is the best and only way to satisfy true southern tradition.

I will not tell you today that I have found the ultimate recipe for cornbread. What I have found is a really good one that goes back to the original tradition of this early American staple. Cornbread and/or buttermilk biscuits were always prepared with a meal according to my 87-year-old grandmother. Her Kentucky roots are not unique in southwestern Ohio and I daresay there are many others from states like Virginia, Tennessee, West Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia who are just as passionate about a good “pone.”

No matter how you developed a taste for great cornbread do your children a favor and pass on the recipe that was given to you. In my case, it came with a fine 9-inch Griswold cast iron skillet that has turned black through many years of repeated seasoning and use. I'll also give you a short explanation of the proper care and feeding of cast iron this week. With a basic understanding of what cast iron cooking is all about, you'll treasure your cast iron and find many ways to use this century old method of non-stick cooking.

Southern Cornbread

Begin by heating 2 tablespoons of bacon grease in a 9-inch cast iron skillet in a 450°F oven long enough to cause the fat to begin to smoke. Place your oven rack in the upper third of the oven.

Whisk together thoroughly in a large bowl:

- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cups stone-ground yellow cornmeal (use the best quality & freshest available!)
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon salt

Whisk until foamy in another bowl:

- 2 large eggs

Whisk into eggs:

- 2 cups of buttermilk (tradition calls for whole buttermilk with flecks of butter)

Add the wet ingredients into the dry and whisk until just blended. Remove your “hot” cast iron skillet from the oven and tilt it to allow the hot grease to cover about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch up the sides of the skillet. Set the skillet on a hot pad and pour your batter in. It should

immediately begin to sizzle and bubble at the edges. Place the skillet back into the oven and bake 20 to 25 minutes until the top is golden brown and firm.

This cornbread comes out of the oven ready to eat! It should be served immediately to enjoy it at its peak of flavor and moistness.

You can acquire quality cast iron cookware either new or used and each has its own specific needs before you begin to use them in your kitchen. A new piece of cookware should be thoroughly cleaned and dried and then seasoned. To accomplish this:

1. Heat your oven to 250° to 300°F.
2. Coat the pan with lard or bacon grease inside and out. **Do not** use a liquid vegetable oil as it will leave a sticky surface and the pan will not properly season.
3. Place pan into the oven for 15 minutes. Remove pan and pour out any excess grease. Return pan to oven and bake for 2 hours.
4. Repeat this process several times to create a strong “seasoning” bond.

If when you put your pan into service you begin using it for foods that are high in fat, the grease will help strengthen the seasoning. After each use it is best to clean the pan only with water and a clean paper towel. If it is necessary scrap the pan with a plastic blade of the type made for such a purpose. Avoid scouring pads and soap.

If you are lucky enough to acquire an heirloom piece of cast iron cookware, its condition will dictate how you prepare it for service. If the piece is rusty, the preferred method of removing the rust is called electrolytic derusting, which allows you to remove only the rust and not iron. It’s a great technique but pretty complicated. The best explanation I’ve found of how to use this process is at www.stovebolt.com.

If you’d prefer the “low tech” approach, hot water, a scouring pad and lots of elbow grease will accomplish the job. You’ll then need to reseason the pan using the same technique we listed above for new cast iron.

A few additional recommendations would be for you to store your cast iron cookware with tops removed and preferably hanging from a pot rack. This will help you avoid rust. Also, after using it, most “old Pro’s” will use lard or bacon grease to touch it up, heat the cast iron on the top of the stove to a temperature that still allows you to wipe it down, then clean it off with a paper towel before storage. If you are placing other cookware on top of it in a cabinet, place a paper towel inside to protect it and to absorb any moisture that may occur.

Lastly, I was told when I first started using cast iron to devote each piece I have to a particular use. I have one skillet I use solely for cornbread, another to sear meats, and so on. This makes real sense when you think about strong tastes and how they can linger. I’m not really interested in trying cornbread that has the subtle taste of catfish in it. I think you get my drift.

This was a historical week for winelovers in the United States as the U.S. Supreme Court released its ruling on direct shipment of wines to consumers from wineries and specialty retailers in other states. For the time being, the barriers preventing wine drinkers from acquiring wines on a direct basis appear to have been removed.

What this means for all of us is the opportunity to acquire wines not normally sold in our location and much better access to specific products you are looking for through the Internet. We will wait to see if there will be a response from state control agencies, however it would appear that this is a very good thing for wine collectors and price conscious consumers.

My “it’s almost summer” selection this week for those of you already tempted to lounge by the pool as the mercury slips out of the 50’s range is a delightfully refreshing German Riesling produced in the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer region of western Germany. The 2003 Senheimer Rosenhang Riesling Qualitätswein is an example of the distinct characteristics that have long made this grape produced in this area the choice of winelovers around the world.

My tasting notes describe “steely and ultra tart green apples with a crispy styling similar to the crunch of a ripe Granny Smith. The bouquet is laced with wild honey suckle, ripe citrus fruit and a lingering hint of Ironwood honey from the mountains of North Carolina.”

Let us know if you have any questions or comments at 888-288-0668 or we can be reached on the web at www.winedog.com. Cheers!