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ALL ABOUT GRITS



Derived from ground corn and a staple of Southern American cuisine, grits are known for their creamy, versatile texture and ability to accompany a wide range of dishes. Evolving from the Old English term "grits," meaning coarse meal, grits were first discovered by Native American tribes when grinding dried maize into a coarse meal. European settlers adopted this practice in the 16th and 17th centuries, especially in the southeastern United States.

Grits are primarily made from dent corn, a variety valued for its soft starch content, which makes it ideal for milling into a smooth yet hearty consistency. Corn thrives in warm, sunny climates, with optimal growing conditions ranging from 70°F to 85°F and requiring a frost-free season of at least 100-150 days. Once mature, the corn is left to dry in the field before being harvested using combines, shelled to separate the kernels from the cob, and further dried to reduce moisture content. The kernels are then milled into different types of grits, with processing methods influencing the final texture and nutritional profile.

Traditional stone-ground grits are produced using stone mills, which preserve the corn's germ and bran, resulting in a richer flavor and higher nutritional value. Meanwhile, hominy grits undergo an additional step where the corn is soaked in an alkaline solution to remove the hull and germ, giving them a smoother texture and a distinct taste. Other variations include quick grits, instant grits, and regional specialties that highlight different types of corn, such as white, yellow, or even blue corn grits.

Beyond their culinary appeal, grits hold a special place in Southern culture and history. They have been the official state food of South Carolina since 1976 and are cherished across the "Grits Belt," a region spanning from Texas to Virginia where the dish is a staple at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Each year, festivals like the World Grits Festival in St. George, South Carolina, celebrate this iconic food with cooking competitions, tastings, and even playful events. Whether served as a humble side dish with butter and salt or transformed into sophisticated gourmet creations, grits remain a symbol of comfort, heritage, and culinary artistry. Their enduring presence in Southern kitchens reflects both their agricultural significance and their role as a deeply cherished, versatile dish that continues to evolve while honoring its rich history.

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HEALTHY INGREDIENT CONTRIBUTION



Grits, a staple of Southern cuisine, can be a healthy addition to a balanced diet when prepared mindfully. To maximize health benefits, opt for whole-grain or stone-ground grits, minimize added butter and heavy cream, and incorporate nutrient-dense toppings.

Folate: Also referred to as folic acid and vitamin B9, folate helps form DNA and RNA and is involved in protein metabolism. Folate also helps the body produce healthy red blood cells and is critical for periods of rapid growth such as during pregnancy. A 1 cup serving of cooked grits (plain cornmeal, no added butter, milk, or salt) provides about 15-20% of the daily recommended value (DV) of folate.

Iron: In addition to helping hemoglobin carry oxygen from the lungs to other parts of the body, iron also helps muscles store and use oxygen, reduces tiredness and fatigue, and improves both mental and physical performance. The daily recommended value (DV) of iron varies widely depending on gender and age.

Lutein/Zeaxanthin: These two carotenoids are known for their eye health benefits including filtering harmful blue light and protecting against macular degeneration and cataracts. To boost their intake, choose yellow corn grits and pair them with foods high in healthy fats like avocado or olive oil to enhance absorption.

Niacin: Approximately 13% of the body's need for niacin can be found in one cup of cooked, plain grits. Niacin is an essential water-soluble vitamin (B3) that plays a crucial role in energy production, metabolism, and overall cellular function.

Protein: A one cup serving of plain, cooked yellow grits can provide 3-4 grams of protein which is used by the body to build and repair tissue, make enzymes and hormones, and build muscle and also.

Thiamine: When consuming one cup of plain, cooked grits you can expect to receive 10-20% of the thiamine your body needs daily. Thiamine, also known as vitamin B1, helps the body convert food into energy and supports various critical functions of the body.

Nutritional information taken from <https://www.culinary.org>

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TYPES AND VARIETIES

Whether you prefer the subtle sweetness of white grits, the hearty depth of yellow grits, the earthy complexity of blue grits, or the balanced profile of speckled grits, there's a perfect type of grits for every dish and palate. Each variety brings its own unique characteristics, allowing for a diverse range of textures, flavors, and culinary applications.



Types of Grits (Processing):

- **Stone-Ground Grits:** Made from whole dried corn kernels that are coarsely ground between stone mills. They retain more of the corn's natural flavor and texture but take longer to cook.
- **Regular (Old-Fashioned) Grits:** Similar to stone-ground but more finely ground and processed, resulting in a smoother texture with a shorter cooking time.
- **Quick Grits:** Finely ground grits that cook in about 5–10 minutes due to more extensive milling.
- **Instant Grits:** Pre-cooked, dehydrated, and finely ground for the fastest preparation (just add hot water). However, they often lack the depth of flavor found in other varieties.
- **Hominy Grits:** Made from hominy (corn that has been treated with an alkali solution to remove the hull), giving them a softer texture and a slightly different taste.

Varieties of Grits (Corn Type):

- **White Grits:** Made from white corn, these grits have a mild, slightly sweet flavor and smooth texture. Their pale color comes from a lower carotenoid content, making them ideal for buttery breakfast dishes and cheese grits.
- **Yellow Grits:** Produced from yellow corn, these grits have a richer, more robust flavor due to their higher beta-carotene content. Their hearty taste makes them great for shrimp and grits or savory casseroles.
- **Blue Grits:** Made from blue or purple corn, these grits have a nutty, earthy taste and a deep violet hue due to their high anthocyanin content. They are less common but prized in specialty Southern and Southwestern dishes.
- **Speckled Grits:** A blend of white and yellow corn, speckled grits offer a balanced flavor and color, combining the sweetness of white corn with the depth of yellow. They work well in slow-cooked dishes where flavors develop over time.

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SELECTING AND STORING

Selecting Grits:

- **Processing Method:** Stone-ground grits have a richer flavor but take longer to cook and require refrigeration. Regular, quick, and instant grits cook faster but have a slightly less intense flavor due to more processing.
- **Corn Variety:** White grits are mild and sweet, yellow grits have a stronger corn flavor, blue grits are nutty and vibrant, and speckled grits offer a balanced taste and color.
- **Texture & Grind Size:** Coarse-ground grits have a chewy texture and need slow cooking, while fine-ground grits cook quickly and result in a smoother, creamier texture.
- **Quality & Freshness:** Fresh grits should have a clean corn aroma and consistent texture. Avoid stale or musty-smelling grits, as they indicate age or improper storage. Stone-ground grits should be kept refrigerated or frozen.
- **Packaging:** Look for grits in airtight packaging to preserve freshness and prevent moisture. Resealable bags or containers are ideal for maintaining quality.
- **Intended Use:** Choose stone-ground grits for slow-cooked dishes, quick grits for fast meals, and blue or speckled grits for unique, gourmet recipes.

Storing Grits:

- **Stone-Ground Grits:** Due to their higher oil content, these should be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator (up to 6 months) or freezer (up to 1 year) to prevent rancidity.
- **Regular, Quick, & Instant Grits:** Store in a cool, dry pantry in a sealed container. These varieties have a longer shelf life, typically up to 1 year if kept in an airtight container away from moisture and heat.
- **Hominy Grits:** Can be stored similarly to regular grits but should be kept away from humidity, as moisture can cause clumping or mold growth.
- **Cooked Grits:** Cooked grits, of all varieties, can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 4-5 days or frozen for up to 3 months. To prevent them from hardening, add a small amount of butter, milk, or stock before reheating to restore their creamy consistency.



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CULINARY USES

Grits are a versatile staple, embraced by many cuisines and adaptable to a wide range of flavors, from rich and savory to sweet and comforting. Whether served at breakfast, lunch, or dinner, they can be transformed into countless delicious dishes. Here are some creative ways to enjoy grits:

- **Grits with Gravy:** For a Southern comfort meal, serve grits with a rich sausage gravy, or even tomato gravy. This combination is perfect for a filling, savory meal.
- **Sweet Grits:** For a sweet twist, grits can be made with milk, sugar, and a touch of cinnamon. This version is often served as a breakfast dish, topped with fruit, honey, or brown sugar for a comforting treat.
- **Grits Soup:** Grits can be added to soups for a creamy texture. They can be paired with ingredients like tomatoes, corn, seafood, or chicken to create a hearty, flavorful soup.
- **Grits as a Base for Stews:** In some dishes, like gumbo or stew, grits are used as a base to absorb the rich, flavorful broth. The grits soak up the liquid, giving them a creamy texture that complements the hearty ingredients.
- **Grits Casseroles:** Grits are the base for savory casseroles, often baked with ingredients like cheese, sausage, spinach, or chicken. These dishes are perfect for family meals or holiday gatherings.
- **Grits Fritters:** Mix grits with cheese, herbs, and spices to form small, bite-sized fritters. These can be fried until crispy and served as an appetizer or side dish.
- **Grits as a Coating:** Use coarse grits as a crust or coating for frying foods like chicken or fish. The gritty texture creates a crunchy, golden exterior that enhances the flavor of the dish.
- **Grits Parfait:** For a fun dessert idea, layer sweetened grits with fruit, yogurt, and granola to create a parfait. This is a creative way to enjoy grits as a dessert or a breakfast treat.



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INTERESTING FACTS



- In the early 1800s, grits were so vital to Southern life that they were occasionally used as a form of currency or barter in rural communities.
- During times of scarcity, grits were a go-to survival food for Southern settlers because of their long shelf life and versatility in different meals.
- Due to the marketing of certain brands and the now-corrected musings of a former Food Network personality, there is a misconception that polenta and grits are basically the same. They are not!
- The first Saturday in March is National Grits Day, where lovers of the dish across the U.S. celebrate with cook-offs, tastings, and plenty of grits.
- Grits have been to space! In the early days of space travel, astronauts were served freeze-dried grits as part of their meals during missions.
- In the 2000s, Grits Art became a thing. Artists began using grits as a medium to create paintings, sculptures, and even jewelry!
- There's actually a song called "Grits Ain't Groceries," made famous by Little Milton in 1965, making grits not only a dish but a part of musical culture.
- If someone serves you grits at breakfast in the South, it's a sign of warmth and generosity—they're literally offering you a taste of Southern comfort.

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RECIPE

Cheese Grits Soufflé
Yield: 8 Servings

- Ingredients:**
- 1 Teaspoon Unsalted Butter, Softened
 - 4 Cups Whole Milk
 - 1 Cup Stone-Grind Grits
 - 1 Teaspoon (or to taste) Kosher Salt
 - 1/4 Teaspoon Black Pepper, Ground
 - 1/8 Teaspoon Nutmeg, Ground
 - 2 Cups (8 Ounces) Sharp Cheddar Cheese, Shredded
 - 2 Tablespoons Unsalted Butter
 - 6 Large Eggs, Separated

Directions:

1. Place a rack in the center of the oven, and preheat the oven to 350°F.
2. Rub the butter on the bottom only of a 2-quart (8-cup) soufflé or baking dish and set aside.
3. Place the milk in a medium saucepan over medium heat and bring to a boil. Pull the pan off the heat, and whisk in the grits, a little at a time, until the grits are incorporated. Place the pan back over medium heat, and let the grits come to a simmer. Stir and cook the grits until smooth and thickened, about 8 to 10 minutes.
4. Turn off the heat, and stir in the salt, pepper, cayenne or nutmeg, cheese, and butter until smooth. Set aside.
5. Crack the eggs, placing the yolks in a medium bowl and the whites in a large bowl. Beat the egg yolks lightly with a fork and add a couple tablespoons of the warm grits to the yolks to bring on their temperature. Stir to combine. Repeat this process two or three times, adding a couple tablespoons grits to the yolks, and then turn the yolk mixture into the pan of grits, stirring to combine well. Set aside.
6. Beat the egg whites on high speed with an electric mixer until stiff peaks form, 2 to 3 minutes. Pour the grits mixture alongside the egg whites in the bowl and fold gently to combine. Turn the mixture into the prepared dish and place the dish in the oven.
7. Bake until the soufflé rises and is golden brown on top, about 40 to 45 minutes. Serve at once.



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QUIZ



After you read through this month's Ingredient of the Month, take this quiz to test your knowledge. In order to earn continuing education hours (CEHs) from the American Culinary Federation (ACF), the test must be completed through the ACF's Online Learning Center. Seventy-five percent accuracy is required to earn one hour of continuing education credits toward professional certification.

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QUIZ

Question #1

Which U.S. state declared grits as its official state food in 1976?

A. Georgia
B. Florida
C. South Carolina
D. Mississippi



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QUIZ

Question #2

What is the key difference between traditional stone-ground grits and hominy grits?

A. Stone-ground grits cook faster
B. Hominy grits are made from white corn only
C. Stone-ground grits have a smoother texture
D. Hominy grits undergo an alkaline soaking process



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QUIZ

Question #3

The lutein and zeaxanthin found in grits primarily benefits which part of the body?

A. Eyes
B. Kidneys
C. Heart
D. Liver




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QUIZ

Question #4



A one-cup serving of plain cooked grits provides about 15-20% of the daily recommended folate intake.


A. True
B. False

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QUIZ

Question #5



Which type of grits are made from coarsely ground whole dried corn kernels and take the longest to cook?


A. Old-fashioned grits
B. Stone-ground grits
C. Hominy grits
D. Polenta grits

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QUIZ

Question #6



Which variety of grits is known for having a richer, more robust flavor due to its higher beta-carotene content?

A. White grits
B. Yellow grits
C. Blue grits
D. Speckled grits


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QUIZ

Question #7

Why is airtight packaging important for storing grits?



- A. It prevents moisture buildup
- B. It enhances their color
- C. It maintains their nutrient content
- D. It makes them cook faster


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QUIZ

Question #8

Why is it suggested that stone-ground grits be stored in the refrigerator?



- A. They are more expensive
- B. They contain artificial preservatives
- C. They have a higher oil content
- D. Because grandma always stored them in the fridge


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QUIZ

Question #9

What is a unique way to use coarse grits in cooking?




- A. As a salad dressing
- B. As a beverage base
- C. As a bread replacement
- D. As a coating for frying food

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QUIZ

Question #10



Polenta and grits are made from the exact same type of corn and have no real differences.

A. True
B. False

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JOIN US NEXT MONTH!



Stay tuned for the next ACF Ingredient of the Month! Be sure to visit the Online Learning Center (OLC) to download a copy of each month's ingredient presentation. Don't forget to take the official IOTM quiz through the OLC to earn one hour of continuing education credits toward professional certification.

For more information:

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