When I was growing up in Indiana, my mother used cornmeal in several dishes — cornbread baked in an iron skillet, mush browned in an iron skillet and breading for fish (yes, fried in an iron skillet!). I must admit, mush wasn’t my favorite. I think it had something to do with the name…

Cornmeal By Any Other Name

This list will help you decode an otherwise simple ingredient:

• Fine-grind cornmeal is also called corn flour.
• Medium-grind cornmeal is the most versatile; if the label says “cornmeal,” it’s a medium grind.
• Coarse-grind cornmeal is also called grits.
• Grits is cornmeal cooked in water or milk to make porridge.
• Mush is made by cooling grits until it “sets up;” then slice it and cook it again to add crispness to the exterior.
• Polenta is the Italian name for coarse-ground cornmeal.
• Hominy is corn that has been soaked in an alkaline-water solution to remove the germ and hull. Several cornmeal products are made from dried hominy, giving them a distinctive flavor:
  • Hominy grits are coarse-ground cornmeal made from dried hominy.
  • Masa is moist dough made from finely ground hominy and used to make corn tortillas, tamales and pupusas.
  • Masa harina is flour made by drying fresh masa to make it shelf-stable.

Dried corn is ground into cornmeal in two different ways. Steel-ground, a process that completely removes the hull and germ, results in a cornmeal that will store almost indefinitely in an airtight container on your pantry shelf. Stone-ground results in a whole grain cornmeal more perishable than steel-ground; it needs to be refrigerated and can be kept up to four months.

Wherever there’s cornmeal, there’s versatility. Cook it in water, milk or broth. Make it into breads, cakes or muffins. Use it to coat fish, meat or vegetables. Sprinkle it on the pan to keep dough from sticking. Cornmeal is truly the all-American grain.

Grilled Polenta

Recipe developed by Corporate Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski and featured in Residential Dining Services. Serves 6–8

• 2 Tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
• ½ medium red onion, small diced
• 2 cloves garlic, finely minced
• 2 cups chicken or vegetable stock, preferably homemade
• 1 cup whole or 2% milk
• 1 ½ teaspoons sea salt (or 1 teaspoon kosher salt or ¾ teaspoon table salt)
• 1 cup polenta (coarse-grind yellow cornmeal)
• 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
• ½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
• 2 Tablespoons unsalted butter
• 1 Tablespoon fresh chopped thyme (or ½ teaspoon dried thyme)
• 1 Tablespoon fresh rosemary (or ¼ teaspoon dried rosemary)
• 1 Tablespoon fresh chopped parsley
• Olive oil, for brushing

In a large, heavy saucepan, heat the olive oil over medium-low heat. Add the red onion and sauté, stirring constantly for about three minutes or until softened. Add the garlic and cook for one minute more. Add the chicken stock, milk, salt and pepper, then bring to a boil over medium-high heat. (If you are using dried herbs, add them at this point.) Reduce the heat; when the liquid is simmering, gradually sprinkle the polenta in a very slow, thin stream, whisking constantly in the same direction until all the grains have been incorporated and no lumps remain. Reduce the heat to very low.

Switch to a wooden paddle and stir thoroughly every one to two minutes for 15 to 20 minutes, or until the mixture pulls away from the sides of the pan and the grains of polenta have softened. Stir in the parmesan cheese, fresh herbs and butter. The mixture will be quite thick. Add salt to taste.

Spray an 8x12-inch roasting pan or glass baking dish with cooking spray. Mound the polenta into the pan; using a rubber spatula, repeatedly dipping in very hot water; spread polenta evenly in the pan. Cover with a kitchen towel and allow to rest for two hours at room temperature or up to 24 hours in the refrigerator.

When ready to serve, pre-heat a non-stick sauté pan or grill over medium-high heat. Brush the polenta into eight equal squares and brush them with olive oil. Transfer the squares to the pan and grill for about six minutes on each side or until deep golden brown. Serve immediately.

Grilled Polenta will be served at Brody Square, Hubbard, Riverwalk Market at Owen Hall, The Gallery at Snyder/Phillips, Wilson and Yakeley on December 9 for lunch. Visit www.eatatstate.com for dining hall hours and menus.

By Peggy Crum, RD, Health4U Nutritionist

December 2010 In partnership with Health4U and Culinary Services

Featured Food: CORNMEAL

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