

Sheri's Skillet Cornbread

There are many ways to make great cornbread (and families certainly have their favorites, as they should), but this is mine. It's the one I put my name on and make with pride.

I know that some people will be stunned, if not offended, by my adding a little sugar to my cornbread. To be such a minor thing, using sugar in cornbread can be controversial. Some people have strong loyalties to a certain style of cornbread, as fierce and unwavering as barbecue loyalties. I'm not trying to stir up trouble with my recipe. My cornbread recipe was staunchly sugar-free until only a couple of years ago when one of the smartest bakers I know convinced me that a little sugar enhances the flavor of the cornmeal without turning the cornbread sweet. It suits me, and everyone ought to be able to eat cornbread that suits them. So, if the sugar isn't your thing, just skip it. (It's the same with the flour, which you can replace with more cornmeal if you prefer.)

In the end, the secret to great cornbread is great cornmeal.

Makes one 9-inch pone

3 tablespoons bacon fat
1 3/4 cups coarse stoneground cornmeal
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 large egg
1 1/2 cups well-shaken buttermilk, preferably full fat

1. Place the bacon fat in a 9-inch cast iron skillet and place it in the oven as it preheats to 450°F. Be sure to use the correct size skillet. If you use a larger skillet, the cornbread will turn out as tough and dry as a hubcap.
2. Whisk together the cornmeal, flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, and baking soda in a medium bowl.
3. In a small bowl, whisk together the egg and buttermilk. Make a well in the center of the cornmeal mixture and pour in the egg mixture. Stir only until blended.
4. Remove the skillet from the oven and scrape in the batter. It will sizzle and pop, so be careful.
5. Bake until the cornbread is firm in the middle and golden brown on top, about 25 minutes.
6. Turn out immediately onto a plate so that it won't sweat in the pan, run it to the table, and serve. Cornbread should be served piping hot or completely cool. Tepid cornbread is the penance of poor planning.

Note: To make this vegetarian, replace the bacon fat with browned butter. Instead of heating fat in the skillet as the oven preheats, prepare the batter and then after Step 3, place the skillet over medium-high heat. Add the butter and let it melt. Cook the butter, gently swirling the pan often, until it melts and begins to foam. As soon as there are small brown dots around the edges of the foam, remove the pan from the heat and continue swirling until the butter is deep golden brown throughout and smells toasty and nutty. Immediately pour the batter into the hot butter and quickly place in the oven to bake.

© Copyright 2021 Sheri Castle.

Honey Butter

Cornbread loves butter, and fresh, high-quality, plain butter never disappoints. But sometimes, as a treat, I like to serve honey butter, which is more of a concept than a hard-and-fast recipe. It's easy to vary this recipe by replacing the honey with sweet syrup, such as sorghum, molasses, cane syrup, or maple (or other hardwood) syrup. Adjust the amount to taste. Pinches of salt and pepper might sound odd, but it makes sweetened butter taste even better.

The powdered sugar in this recipe isn't for additional sweetness. It's role is to make the butter mixture creamier.

Makes about 1 cup, about 8 servings

1 cup (8 ounces) butter, at room temperature

1/4 cup honey, or to taste

3 tablespoons powdered sugar, sifted

Kosher salt, to taste

Ground black pepper, to taste

1. Beat the butter vigorously with a spoon in a small bowl until smooth.
2. Beat in the honey and powdered sugar.
3. Season with salt and a little pepper, if you like.

Make-Ahead: Refrigerate in an airtight container for up to one week or freeze for up to three months.

© Copyright 2021 Sheri Castle.