

DARING PAIRING

Wines to pour with the bold flavors of Korean cuisine. **UNCORKED, PAGE 8**



'THE ASIAN GRILL'

Cookbook takes its 'cue from the East. **BOOKSHELF, PAGE 3**

JUST FOR HER

Chocolate mousse will make Mom's day. **WOLFGANG PUCK, PAGE 3**

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GOOD EATING

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Is this
polenta
...or just mush?

It's both! Corn in its many ground forms is ubiquitous, and, oh, so trendy ...

By Peggy Wolff | Special to the Tribune ■ Photos by Bob Fila | Tribune staff photographer

Corn—the grain second only to wheat in acres planted—is making a comeback. But it's the ground form of the grain that's getting the buzz.

All across town, chefs are using ground corn: in the now-fancy Italian dish called polenta; in traditional Southern foods like grits, corn muffins, corn breads, corncakes and corn puddings; and in Latin American foods such as *arepas*, *empanadas* and *tamales*.

Most ground corn is made from field corn—

in yellow, white or blue—which has less sugar and more complex carbohydrates than sweet corn. It stays on the stalk until it is dry enough to harvest.

In our markets, ground corn is sold as cornmeal in various grinds; as a convenience food, such as instant polenta; as corn flour, in baking mixes; or as corn tortillas, once tucked away in the ethnic aisle but now stacked alongside sandwich bread.

We are no longer a nation of strangers where many ethnic corn dishes are concerned.

"Historically we've eaten from a narrow spectrum of cuisines but as time goes on,

more ethnic foods have entered our diets," said Mark Erickson, vice president for continuing education at the Culinary Institute of America.

He added that we're seeing immigration from places where corn is a more important part of the diet "and it's driving the evolution of the American palate away from Northern European foods."

Chef Mike Artlip, chairman of the culinary arts program at Kendall College, also sees a change. "They want alternatives to white

PLEASE SEE CORN ON CENTERSPREAD



Tribune photos by Bob Fila; foodstyling by Corinne Kozlak

CORNCAKES WITH RED PEPPER SAUCE

Corncakes with red pepper sauce

Preparation time: 18 minutes
Cooking time: 3 minutes per batch
Yield: 34 cakes

■ This popular corncake dish from Wishbone restaurant in Chicago uses three versions of corn: whole kernel, cream style and ground.

Red pepper sauce:
 ½ cup white wine
 3 shallots, minced
 ¼ cup whipping cream
 1 stick (½ cup) unsalted butter, cut into tablespoons
 2 red peppers, roasted, skinned, seeded, chopped

Corncakes:
 ¾ cup flour
 ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons yellow cornmeal
 2 teaspoons sugar
 ¼ teaspoon each: baking powder, baking soda, salt
 2½ cups buttermilk
 2 eggs
 1 tablespoon plus 1½ teaspoons Thai or other Asian hot chili sauce
 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
 2 green onions, white and some green, thinly sliced
 ¾ cup frozen whole kernel corn
 ¼ cup each: cream-style corn, dry bread crumbs, vegetable oil

1. For sauce, heat the wine and shallots in a small saucepan over high heat; cook until reduced by half, about 5 minutes. Stir in the cream; cook until reduced by half, about 3 minutes. Whisk in the butter; 1 tablespoon at a time, stirring after each addition. Reduce heat to medium-low; stir in peppers. Keep warm.

2. For corncakes, combine the flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a medium bowl; set aside. Whisk together the buttermilk, eggs, chili sauce and melted butter in a large bowl. Stir in the green onions, frozen corn and cream-style corn. Stir in the reserved dry ingredients; stir in bread crumbs.

3. Heat 1 tablespoon of the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Pour in 2 tablespoons of the batter to form corncakes 2½ inches in diameter. Cook until air bubbles form on top, approximately 2 minutes. Turn the cakes with a spatula. Cook until they spring back when touched, about 1 minute. Repeat with remaining batter, adding oil as needed.

Note: Southeast Asian hot chili sauce is sold in Asian markets or in the Asian aisle of some supermarkets such as Treasure Island.

Nutrition information per corncake:
 81 calories, 58% of calories from fat, 5 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 24 mg cholesterol, 7 g carbohydrates, 2 g protein, 104 mg sodium, 0.5 g fiber

Cheddar corn pudding

Preparation time: 18 minutes
Cooking time: 40 minutes
Yield: 10 servings

■ This corn pudding from chef Amanda Stine of Garland's Oak Creek Lodge in Sedona, Ariz., can be found in her new cookbook, "Sharing the Table at Garland's Lodge." The dish is great as an entree with soup or salad.

4 eggs
 3 cups corn kernels
 2 cups milk
 6 green onions, white and some green, thinly sliced
 1½ cups whipping cream
 1 package (8 ounces) shredded sharp Cheddar, pepperjack or Gruyere cheese
 ¼ cup cornmeal
 ½ teaspoon coarse salt
 1 to 2 dashes hot pepper sauce

1. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Beat the eggs in a large bowl; set aside. Combine 2 cups of the corn kernels with the milk in a blender or food processor; puree. Stir mixture into the beaten eggs. Stir in the green onions, cream, cheese, cornmeal, remaining 1 cup of the corn kernels, salt and hot pepper sauce.

2. Pour into a greased 13-by-9-inch baking pan. Bake until golden, about 40 minutes.

Nutrition information per serving:
 350 calories, 65% of calories from fat, 26 g fat, 15 g saturated fat, 170 mg cholesterol, 19 g carbohydrates, 13 g protein, 335 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

Sources for cornmeal

If you want to order cornmeal straight from the mill, according to Betty Fussell, author of "The Story of Corn," America's founding food is being rescued by at least 114 mills still producing cornmeal the old-fashioned way, grinding the whole grain, adding nothing to it, sifting nothing out of it.

The only disadvantage to using whole grains is their limited shelf life and their attraction to bugs. This can be effectively eliminated by simply keeping the products refrigerated or frozen upon arrival. This step should allow you to enjoy great flavor even after months of storage.

ONLINE SOURCES FOR MILLED CORN PRODUCTS:

Wilmot Mill in Indiana (wilmotmill.com; 800-387-1804)

Great River Organic Milling in Wisconsin (greatrivermilling.com; 608-687-9580)

Kenyon's Grist Mill in Rhode Island (kenyonsgristmill.com; 401-783-4054)

Anson Mills in South Carolina (ansonmills.com; 803-467-4122)

Byrd Mill in Virginia (byrdmill.com; 888-897-3336)

—P.W.



TALEGGIO POLENTA

"Calling mush polenta is a way of conferring dignity on the dish."

Is this polenta ...or just mush?

CORN

CONTINUED FROM THE COVER

bleached flour: Americans want a high-quality flour and corn's one of them."

What's on the rise? "Tortillas, sopes, tamales—they're really coming back," Artlip said. "There also is a whole lot of desire for corn with the resurgence of Southwest and Mexican food."

A few corn dishes prized by chefs come from other places where corn has been a star: polenta from Italy; corn cakes from Rhode Island; and grits and spoon breads from the South.

Italian approach

Polenta is a thick mush made by boiling coarsely ground cornmeal in water or stock until it thickens. It is considered one of the true comfort foods of the Italian table with roots in the peasant cooking of the country, notably Piedmont, Lombardy and Veneto.

Mush is the same thick, cooked mixture as polenta but can be made by using any grind of cornmeal. A mushy, lightest silken liquid, with a weight just this side of as light as air, depending on the finishing touches—slathered with Italian cheese, Danish butter or French cream, or served with the heartwarming comfort food all over a country. The culinary map turns out different in different hands. The mush-and-milk ritual of our parents and grandparents during the Depression was finished off with a large pat of melting butter, sprinkled with sugar and a spice, and baptized with cold milk.

It's essentially gruel, but with such a negative connotation, calling mush polenta is the way to confer dignity on the dish.

"Most people are potato crazed; I am polenta crazed," says Rick Tramonto writes in his cookbook, "Amuse-Bouche." The key, the chef wrote, is to add enough butter so that it's irresistibly rich. "I remember once eating soft polenta with roast pork at chef Gualtiero Marchesi's three-star Michelin restaurant in Milan, Italy... and when we asked for seconds, they brought the pot from the kitchen and scooped the golden polenta straight onto our plates."

In his Chicago restaurant Tru, Tramonto loves to use yellow cornmeal polenta as a backdrop under a meat dish, or as a fish dish or as a centerpiece. Why does he choose yellow stone-ground cornmeal when he can get white? "I love the yellow color. White washes out."

Polenta aficionados like chef Jeff Muldrow, who owns Va Pensiero restaurant in Evanston, insist that cooking polenta is a seamless sequence of tasks, reduced to a few motions: Slowly pour the meal into the boiling liquid, reduce to a simmer, stir, stir, stir, or if it sticks and develops lumps,

soft polenta cooked with a higher ratio of liquid has the consistency of hot cereal. Pour it into a bowl, dress it with a buttery-rich melting cheese like mascarpone, and it's done. In its firmer style, polenta gets an instant makeover. Less liquid is used so the finished polenta is

on the tighter side. In this preparation it's poured into a sheet pan, cooled and cut. It'll hold its shape. Grill it, fry it saute it, or roast it—it takes to all these methods.

Polenta has come to reflect a nostalgia for old times but with the profusion of polenta dishes all over town, we're seeing it revisited in the chicest of places, at the chicest of prices.

Eastern specialty

At the heart of New England's love affair with ground corn are the families who grew up with johnnycakes as a breakfast staple. Commonly called the johnnycakes of Rhode Island—because they are made with stone-ground white flint Indian corn from that state—they can be crusty outside, or thin and lacy like a crepe.

A matter of culinary pride in the state, the cornmeal pancakes inspire debates as to which is the true johnnycake and which is the true spelling: "johnny-," "joonny-," or "journey-cake."

Chef Jasper White, owner of the Summer Shack in Cambridge and other locations, said he does "the lacy one." Served as a breakfast corn pancake with maple syrup, the chef uses only the johnnycake flour from Kenyon's Grist Mill in Rhode Island.

"The nearest thing to a johnnycake," said Rhode Island cookbook author Barbara Sherman Stetson, "is a Southern pone cake, because it has no leavening." In her "Island Cookbook," the self-appointed johnnycake queen swears by the thicker South County version, a recipe that she says has been passed down through 11 generations of her family.

Spoon bread swoon

Until baking powders were readily available, Southern housewives leavened their corn batters with eggs, turning puddings and breads into spoon breads. Wishbone Restaurant chef/owner Joel Nixon said that the soft corn bread that you can spoon out of a baking dish is like a corn muffin but with the egg whites in it.

"Most people in Chicago didn't know what spoon bread was, so we called it corn pudding," he said. Wishbone's menu is bursting with bold combinations of corn, and many items embrace corn in its whole and ground versions. The corncakes look like pancakes but they have the distinct taste of meal ground from fresh corn kernels, giving them an unmistakably gutsy taste:

"Once you cut into it," said sous chef Kip Hursey, "you get green flecks of scallions and bright yellow sweet corn show up."

Most popular are the corn muffins, but they also do grits with ham or shrimp. "Or cheese. It's got to be sharp Cheddar shredded down," Hursey said. "Put cheese into the grits, pour the grits into a pan, bake for 30 minutes or until they settle, cut them into squares, give them an egg wash and dredge in cornmeal. Fry 'em up."

From the Southern states to northern Italy, the centuries-old grain in its ground form is new again, especially in the kitchens of chefs who are developing a corn cuisine of their own.

Taleggio polenta

Preparation time: 10 minutes
Cooking time: 20 minutes
Chilling time: 1 hour
Yield: 10 servings

■ Chef Jeff Muldrow of Va Pensiero restaurant developed this recipe using a full-flavored cheese from the Lombardy region of Italy: Fontina, another cheese that melts well, could be substituted.

2 quarts water
 2 teaspoons salt
 1½ cups coarse cornmeal
 1 cup diced Taleggio or Fontina cheese
 3 cups grated Parmesan cheese, plus more if desired
 ½ stick (¼ cup) butter
 Freshly ground pepper

1. Heat salted water to a boil in a Dutch oven over high heat. Slowly whisk in the cornmeal; reduce heat to a simmer. Cook, stirring often, until water has been absorbed and the polenta is very thick, about 20 minutes. Stir in the cheeses, butter and pepper; turn off heat.

2. Pour polenta into lightly buttered 8-inch-square baking pan. Top with additional grated Parmesan, if desired.

3. Chill polenta until firm, about 1 hour or up to 12 hours. Slice or cut into squares; reheat by either roasting on a lightly buttered baking sheet, grilling, or by coating lightly with flour then sauteing in butter.

Note: Taleggio cheese can be purchased at Sunset Foods, Treasure Island and Italian markets.

Nutrition information per serving:

317 calories, 52% of calories from fat, 18 g fat, 11 g saturated fat, 51 mg cholesterol, 20 g carbohydrates, 18 g protein, 622 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

Soft polenta with forest mushrooms

Preparation time: 13 minutes
Cooking time: 45 minutes
Yield: 10 appetizer servings

■ This recipe comes from chef Rick Tramonto of Tru. It is one of his signature dishes at the restaurant and it appears in "Amuse-Bouche," by Tramonto with Mary Goodbody.

2½ cups whipping cream or half-and-half
 ½ cup polenta or cornmeal
 2 tablespoons grapeseed or olive oil
 ¾ cup chopped fresh mushrooms, such as a combination of shiitake, chanterelle, black trumpet and oyster
 2 each, finely chopped: garlic cloves, shallots
 1 bay leaf
 3 tablespoons dry white wine
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 Freshly ground pepper
 3 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
 2 tablespoons unsalted butter

1. Heat the cream and polenta to a boil, stirring, in a large saucepan over medium-high heat; reduce heat to low. Cook, stirring often, until thickened, about 45 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the mushrooms; cook, stirring occasionally, until mushrooms are browned and softened, about 12 minutes. Stir in the garlic, shallots and bay leaf; cook, stirring, until the garlic and shallots are softened, about 3 minutes. Add the white wine; stir and scrape up the browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Remove from the heat; discard the bay leaf. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Cover; keep warm.

3. Add cheese and butter to polenta, stirring until the butter melts. Spoon polenta on each of 10 small plates; top each with some of the mixed mushrooms.

Nutrition information per serving:

296 calories, 84% of calories from fat, 28 g fat, 16 g saturated fat, 89 mg cholesterol, 9 g carbohydrates, 3 g protein, 178 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

The many forms of ground corn



GRITS, OR HOMINY GRITS

Hominy is dried white or yellow corn that has had its hull and germ removed. Hominy grits refers to the ground hominy grains. They usually are simmered with water or milk until very thick, making a breakfast cereal especially popular in the South.



CORNMEAL

Cornmeal is made of ground corn kernels. Water-ground meal retains the vitamin-rich germ while commercially ground meal is made from the starchy part of the kernel.



POLENTA

The Italian name for coarse cornmeal mush. It is either cooked "hard"—cooled, solidified, cut into shapes and grilled, fried or sauteed; or "soft"—served straightaway, warm, thick, but still pourable.



CORN FLOUR

Finely ground cornmeal, available in white or yellow



MASA HARINA

Used to make corn tortillas, this is flour ground from lime treated and hulled corn kernels.

—Peggy Wolff