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KITCHEN COMFORTS: SIMPLE SHRIMP AND GRITS

This summer I traveled to my home state of Georgia and fed and watered my deep southern roots with a favorite meal of mine, Shrimp and Grits.

I never truly appreciated grits until I moved farther North. And I missed them. The sweetness of oatmeal or the bagel and cream cheese breakfast just doesn't satisfy me like a bowl full of steaming hot grits.

My growing family is from Maryland, but they are well fed with southern fare. Growing up in Georgia, I spent many summer days in Grandma's unairconditioned kitchen, learning the essence of southern cuisine.

Really, we were just cooking supper with the usual dishes like collard greens, butter beans, stewed corn, fried fish, cornbread, and grits. Grits for breakfast, lunch, or dinner—in the South it is an expected part of every meal.

In my family we eat grits savory style, with plenty of butter and salt. When I meet fellow grits lovers, we all agree that the key to good grits is to have plenty of butter and plenty of salt.

The story of grits begins with corn, a plant native to the Americas that was domesticated over 10,000 years ago as a primary food source. Adopted into Southern culture from its Native American origins, grits gained popularity as an inexpensive, nutritious, easy to prepare food.

Today grits are found on menus all over the US and are served many ways--steaming hot with butter and cheese, baked in a casserole, or cooled, sliced, and fried in the pan. Some even prefer their grits sweetened with sugar and cream.

Though I've cooked grits for decades, I just started cooking shrimp at home in the last few years. Shrimp is easy to prepare, budget friendly, and a great source of protein, essential fats, vitamin D, vitamin B12, and Selenium. I purchase frozen shrimp that is peeled and deveined. I always keep a bag in the freezer so I can prepare it on the busiest of weeknights.

Grits are a staple in my pantry. Locally I shop for yellow grits, which I prefer over the white corn variety. I do not buy instant or quick grits because those tend to lack flavor and texture.

Stone ground grits are more flavorful and are usually ready in about 15-20 minutes. I use the traditional ratio of 4 parts water to 1 part grits, though others sometimes add milk or cream.

One key to cooking grits is that you cannot leave them unattended. Grits require stirring, and a lot of it—this is what puts the love into this Southern comfort food, prevents lumps, and gives a delicious creamy texture.

Each cook is a little different, and grits recipes vary from kitchen to kitchen. Here, I share the basics of cooking Shrimp and Grits to get you started. I encourage you to explore additions and alternates as you get comfortable with the recipe. I'll share some ideas along the way.

SIMPLE SHRIMP AND GRITS

1 pound bag frozen jumbo shrimp, peeled and deveined
1 cup yellow grits
4 cups water
1-2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
2 tablespoons butter
1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil
1-2 teaspoons salt
1/2 - 1 tablespoon fajita or taco seasoning mix
1/4 teaspoon pepper

Begin by thawing your shrimp. I use the quick thaw method of submerging the bag of shrimp in a container of cool water, weighting it with a plate. This step can take up to 30 minutes. Don't use hot water, as this will thaw unevenly. You can also thaw overnight in the fridge or use fresh shrimp.

Drain thawed shrimp in a colander, give a light rinse, and pat dry. Put raw shrimp in a bowl with 1/2 tablespoon of olive oil and 1/2 - 1 tablespoon of fajita seasoning and toss gently to coat. Allow to sit in seasoning 15 minutes while you cook the grits.

Grits: Add water to a large saucepan with high walls. Cover and bring to a boil. Once boiling rapidly, add all the grits to the water using a steady stream, stirring well using a fork or whisk. Turn the heat to low and continue to cook uncovered, stirring frequently to prevent sticking and foaming, and to break up any lumps. Cook grits at a low boil, stirring frequently, for 7-15 minutes until the texture is creamy and thickened.

Remove grits from the heat and stir in butter, 1 teaspoon salt, and pepper. Add shredded cheese and stir to mix. Grits will thicken as they cool. Add more salt to taste if your grits seem bland after adding the cheese. Cover and set aside while you cook the shrimp. It is normal to get a skin on the top of your grits, just stir to mix.

Shrimp: Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Add seasoned shrimp to pan, spreading them evenly. Shrimp will cook quickly, turning pink on the cooked side in 2-3 minutes. Flip each shrimp and cook 1-3 more minutes until all shrimp are pink and cooked through. Season with pinch of salt, if desired. Remove shrimp from the pan to avoid overcooking. For a quick sauce add a small amount of water or broth to the pan, stir to mix with pan juices and pour over the shrimp.

To serve, pour cheese grits into bowls and top with 4-6 shrimp and sauce. Traditional additions to this dish include spicy sausage and gravy, chopped bacon or country ham, collard greens, poached egg, sour cream, goat cheese, or scallions. Hope y'all enjoy!

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