

SOUTHERN STYLE CORNBREAD

From Marnie Jo Petray

Learning to make cornbread was my first experience with unexpected death. When I was six and in first grade at Archbishop O'Brien Catholic School, my Czech-American maternal grandmother taught me to make cornbread on a cold, March, Arkansas morning, the last Saturday the week before Easter. We stood in her drafty, farmhouse kitchen, she in her soft taupe loafers and me on a straight-backed wooden chair, and she let me pour the measured ingredients into the bowls. I was careful not to spill any.

As she reached to put back the bag of cornmeal, a tiny mouse ran out from behind the breadbox where she kept the dry baking goods. With her heavy, hand-annotated cookbook in one hand and the bag of Martha White in the other, she raised the cookbook and thwacked the mouse on the kitchen counter, reducing it to a small, gray-brown flattened ball of fur. I could only gasp in horror. Inconsolable, I dropped to the kitchen floor in a flood of tears, wailing that I could not understand why she had done such a thing.

Without a word, she matter-of-factly went to the pantry, dumped out a box of matches into a small bowl, scooped up the mouse pulp, and placed the body inside the sturdy cardboard box, asking me to follow her outside. Too afraid not to, I trailed slowly behind her to the giant pecan tree that stood outside the kitchen window where we hid eggs every Easter Sunday. She told me to dig a hole, cover the matchbox well, and press hard because dirt was too precious to waste and blow away. We performed a proper mouse burial: two Hail Marys, one Our Father, the Apostles' Creed (I had just learned it), and she read last rights from her New American Catholic Bible. She marched me back inside to finish the cornbread, but I decided not to eat any when it was done, that day.

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Ingredients:

- 1 T rendered bacon fat (or vegetable oil)
- 2 1/2 c white cornmeal
- 1 c all-purpose flour
- 2 tsp
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1/2 tsp baking soda
- 1 c buttermilk
- 1 c low-fat milk
- 2 large eggs
- 2 T melted butter

Preparation:

1. Preheat oven to 400°. Add 1-2 T of rendered bacon fat (for purists, or vegetable oil if you prefer) to a 10-inch well-seasoned cast iron skillet; place skillet in oven. Be careful; bacon fat melts quickly and can burn easily.
2. In a mixing bowl, combine the meal, flour, salt, baking powder and baking soda.
3. In another bowl, whisk buttermilk and milk with eggs and melted butter. Gradually fold milk mixture into dry ingredients, folding and mixing just until all dry ingredients are moist. Do not overmix.
4. Using oven mitts, carefully remove the hot skillet from the oven; swirl slightly so oil coats bottom and sides of pan. Pour batter into the skillet then return to oven. Reduce heat to 350°. Bake cornbread for 35 to 45 minutes, until it pulls away from sides of pan and is lightly browned with a deep brown crust. Cut into wedges. Serve warm or cold. ☺