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HSPI 249 Food Writing

29 April 2015

Sugar Has No Place in Cornbread

Well, let me rephrase that. Sugar has no place in Texas Cornbread. Some would say it has no place in Southern Cornbread. Mark Twain, in an autobiographical sketch in 1898, went so far as to say, “The North thinks it knows how to make corn bread, but this is a gross superstition. Perhaps no bread in the world is quite as good as Southern corn bread and perhaps no bread in the world is quite as bad as the Northern imitation of it.” And that would be, in my opinion, because Yankee cornbread is made with a flour and cornmeal mix, and a lot of sugar, which renders it soft, moist, fluffy and sweet, just like cake. Mark Twain had strong opinions. Like Twain, Southerners can get downright touchy when it comes to defining how certain iconic dishes should be made, or not made. I repeat—sugar has no place in cornbread.

If you would like to try the authentic thing, there are a few more caveats. Cornbread should be made wholly of cornmeal, preferably stone-ground coarse cornmeal that makes an open crumb. The milk used should be buttermilk. Since the sweetness comes from the natural sweetness of the cornmeal itself, nary a grain of sugar is required. It should always be made in a preheated cast iron skillet, smoking hot so that the batter sizzles when it hits the pan. You omnivores may use bacon drippings in the bottom of the skillet, in lieu of butter, to produce a deep, crackling

crust. When brought to the supper table, it must be served with butter. Real butter. And then if you can't quite imagine cornbread without sweetness, go right ahead and drizzle a little sorghum syrup over it. This produces a taste so different from sweetened cornbread that I suspect you'll try it once and be hooked.

Cornbread is sort of a religion in the South. Even though more corn is grown in Iowa and Illinois than down South, cornbread remains quintessentially Southern. From colonial days until well into the 20th century the daily bread, for all but the wealthiest Southerners, was cornbread. "Poor folks" cornbread was made with buttermilk, without either flour or sugar. As Majorie Kinnan Rawlings noted in her book, Cross Creek, published in 1942, "The hot biscuit runs a poor second to cornbread, but it is considered of higher social caste. We abrogate and deprecate cornbread when we have guests, but we should consider ourselves deficient in hospitality if we served a company meal without hot biscuits."

While growing up in East Texas in the fifties, my farmer grandparents identified the only two types of bread as: white bread, or cornbread. The "white bread" was store bought and not readily used until sandwiches came into vogue, and sandwiches weren't the sort of hearty farm meal Mama served to Granddaddy and the farm hands. Indeed, for a small East Texas gal, no treat compared to eating hot cornbread slathered with butter, melting down its sides and pooling in my crumb covered hands. I wouldn't have traded a slice of cornbread for that of any cake I can imagine. Among my earliest mealtime memories is that of watching in wonder as Granddaddy crumbled his cornbread into a tall glass of cold buttermilk.

And nothing was so satisfying as eating hot cornbread with black-eyed or cream peas, a mess of pinto beans, collard greens, fried catfish, or Texas chili.

Because I am a realist, and I want you to love your cornbread, you may replace a small amount of cornmeal with unbleached all-purpose flour to produce a slightly less porous crumb. But please try the all cornmeal version first, without the tablespoon or two of sugar you are bound to add at some point. And no, you don't need a half-cup of sugar! Substitute a Pyrex baking dish if you haven't yet availed yourself of the hearty cast-iron skillet you will pass down to your children. But please, don't make sweet cornbread served with whipped honey butter and call it authentic! And don't serve it to me.