

The Great Cornbread Conundrum: and Reinventing the Hoecake by Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

The Problem: For the first few years, there was something missing at “Something Different”: Cornbread, in at least one of its infinite iterations, is featured at just about every traditional Southern eatery and barbecue joint – and with good reason. Cornbreads are simple and quick, easy to make, and the perfect accompaniment for barbecue, soups, seafood and just about anything else. It is one of those “comfort” things deeply engrained in American culture. We make our own buns and subs but we have customers who have problems with wheat flour, and so we wanted to offer a gluten-free alternative.

The Cornundrum: Many restaurants make cornbread on sheet pans in the morning, allow it to cool and serve it all day long. It soon gets dry and crumbly and loses the moist, steamy “goodness” of fresh cornbread. Most of the time it won’t even melt butter. Many barbecue joints throughout the South bake corn sticks or fry hushpuppies. To get that nice crunchy crust on corn sticks you need to bake them in hot, cast iron molds, which we don’t have. We would also need to operate an extra oven just for corn sticks – it gets hot enough in our deli in the summertime, thank you. Hushpuppies are easy and good, but quickly mess up cooking oil and require a separate fryer. I never found a recipe that I thought would work for us. Most modern recipes for cornbread and hushpuppies call for wheat flour and sugar – no help for the gluten intolerant and an affront to cornbread connoisseurs.

The Solution: Enter the homely, primitive and mostly forgotten hoecake. Eminently practical and delicious, hoecakes (AKA Johnnycakes, journeycakes, griddlecakes) are the simplest and quickest of all cornmeal quick breads. We have the grill on all of the time anyway, so there is no problem with dropping a few globs of batter for a fresh batch. Wet and dry ingredients can be mixed ahead of time and combined, along with a liquid (we use buttermilk) as needed. They are good hot or cold and travel well for parties and catering. They are great for breakfast slathered with butter and topped with syrup, molasses, honey or jelly. As far as I know, nobody else in the business makes hoecakes, but, after all, we *are* “Something Different”!

The Story: When English settlers first came to America, they had to adapt to a new grain: Indian corn or maize. Being accustomed to wheat breads that rise, they were not at all impressed with the heavy, substantial breads made with corn. Natives showed them how to make meal and hominy and how to prepare it in various ways including mush, batters, pones, breads and flatbreads. Initially composed of nothing but cornmeal and water and maybe a little salt, primitive cornbreads were quickly adapted to European methods and became the staple food for colonists, soldiers and travelers. Regional names evolved for different cooking methods and proportions. To make things more confusing, the names are used interchangeably to describe the same thing. Initially, all were primitive hearth breads, cooked by an open fire with minimal utensils:

- Ashcakes, as the name implies, were simply pones (oblong pieces of dough about two inches thick, from the Algonquin word “appone”) covered with hot ashes to bake. When done, the ashes were brushed off and the pones sometimes rinsed in water. Pones were often coated with dry meal or wrapped in leaves or cornhusks when available, to keep them relatively ash free.
- Hoecakes: From Maryland on South, practically every settler owned a tobacco hoe for planting and cultivating: Not like our modern light garden hoes but, forged from heavy iron, they were wide and flat with an iron strap on the back side for inserting a handle. A quick tap on the ground dislodged the handle and the blade could then be placed over the fire or on coals for a makeshift griddle. Thus, in the South, corn cakes cooked on a griddle or on top of a wood stove are called “hoecakes”. I have found the remnants of several colonial “tobacco hoes” around our farm and I have one at the store that the pigs rooted up last winter. The flat top of the firebox on “Old 97” makes an excellent griddle and I plan to put it to good use at the Oinkster Festival.
- In the Northern colonies, there were not many hoes but lots of rocks. Travelers could cook corn cakes on hot rocks, or fix a mess before they left home, to eat on the trail. These little cakes traveled well and were infinitely better than hard tack, so they acquired the name “journey cakes”, which was eventually corrupted to “Johnny cakes”. Food historians have other versions of the story, but I like this one so I’m sticking to it.
- Bannock bread was baked by radiant heat on a flat board (called a bannock board) inclined before a fire. During the War Between the States, a soldier could prop his tin cups up in front of the fire as a small bannock board.
- Dodgers were small patties of stiff cornmeal dough fried in oil or fat. Later, when onions were added, they became “hushpuppies”.
- Mush (porridge, gruel) is simply cornmeal, water and a little salt boiled in a pot until smooth. Once popular for breakfast, mush has fallen from grace – probably because of the unappetizing names. Italians re-introduced it as polenta and it is experiencing a resurgence in popularity. Cold mush can be sliced, rolled in flour and fried. When made with eggs and milk, mush becomes batter. The epitome of batter breads is spoon bread – light, rich and a test of any good cook.

As the country became more settled, cooking methods improved and cornbreads became more sophisticated. Dutch ovens and spiders (cast iron frying pans with three legs for hearth cooking) allowed backcountry housewives to make true cornbread. The more primitive hoecakes, ashcakes and bannock bread soon fell from favor, as they were associated with a class of people too poor and backwards to make proper cornbread. Eggs and milk or buttermilk were often added and cornbreads were baked in an oven. Some innocent but misguided souls, obviously putting on airs, added flour and sugar or molasses culminating in Anadama bread.

The Recipe: I started my experiments with traditional hoecakes: cornmeal, water and salt. They were good. Then I added minced onion, eggs and baking soda and replaced the water with buttermilk to get more rise and flavor. They were better. Then one evening I added minced jalapeños and canned corn and the “Something Different Jalapeño hoecake” was born – moist and flavorful but not really spicy as jalapeños just add an assertive dimension. It took a while for customers to figure out what they were, but now we make them all the time. This basic recipe can be used for muffins, cornbread or hushpuppies.

Something Different Jalapeño Hoecakes

Dry Pre-Mix for three batches:

6 cups (2 lbs.) finely ground corn meal

2 tsp salt

2 tsp adobo

3 tsp (1 Tbsp) baking soda

Wet Pre-mix for about 7 batches

1 Cup Jalapeno peppers, drained

1 1/2 Cups onion – about 1 medium

Pulse in food processor to mince

1 – 15 oz cans corn, drained

3/8 Cup Olive oil

Pulse briefly

Pack in ½ Pint (1 cup) Containers

To make 1 batch or about 20, 3-4 inch hoecakes

1 Pint (2 cups) dry mix in mixing bowl

½ Pint (1 cup) wet premix

In empty premix container lightly beat 2 eggs

Stir into dry ingredients

Shake buttermilk and stir in about 1 cup or enough for a fairly stiff batter.

Drop by spoonfuls on hot oiled griddle and level with the back of the spoon.

Flip when bubbles appear on the upper surface

*Bile dem cabbage down
Bake dat hoecake brown
The only song that I can sing
Is bile dem cabbage down*

Traditional Appalachian fiddle tune



Photo by Dan Gill

**Remnants of Colonial era tobacco hoes and an Indian grindstone, used to
grind corn, acorns and seeds into meal. Found on Remlik Hall Farm
(patented 1648-50)**

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