

Cajun Shrimp & Garlicky Cheese Grits – Comfort du Jour

There is no right-or-wrong when it comes to this classic southern dish. Whether served with a lush and savory gravy, or piled high with onions, peppers and tomatoes, or spiked with spicy andouille or tasso ham, you are guaranteed a flavorful experience. Over the 34 years that I've lived in N.C., I've developed my own recipe into what I believe captures the best of all the varieties I've tasted around these parts.

The key to delicious shrimp and grits is proper cooking of the grits, and my secret is this: treat them like risotto. Cook them low and slow, with plenty of broth additions and plenty of stirring, and finish them with a little cream or half and half. You'll be rewarded with a silky, luxurious base for whatever simple flavors accompany the shrimp.

This recipe serves 2.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup yellow grits, a.k.a. polenta* (see notes)
2 cups low-sodium vegetable broth
About 2 cups hot water, as needed for cooking the grits*
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
Salt and pepper
Frank's RedHot Original sauce, to taste*
2 Tbsp. light cream or half and half*
1/3 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese
Extra virgin olive oil for sautéing
2 links smoked andouille sausage, cut into bite-size pieces
Handful of cremini mushrooms, cleaned and sliced
About 2/3 pound of wild-caught shrimp, peeled and deveined
A few shakes of your favorite Cajun seasoning*
2 scallions (green onions), trimmed and sliced

*NOTES

For the best results, and creamy grits, do not use anything packaged as "instant." My preferred brand is Bob's Red Mill polenta, which you can find in well-stocked supermarkets, Walmart or online.

It's helpful to heat the water in a teakettle or the microwave ahead of time and keep it on standby. When you add liquid to polenta that is already cooking, you want the liquid to be warm.

I lean toward low-sodium versions of broth and seasonings so that I have more control of the overall salt in my recipes. Check your labels and taste as you go.

I love the flavor of RedHot sauce, but Texas Pete or Tabasco would also be good for a spike of flavor in the grits.

For readers abroad, "half and half" is a term used to describe a popular dairy product in the U.S. It is essentially equal parts light cream and whole milk, with about 12% milkfat.

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We use a dry Cajun seasoning that my husband picked up in New Orleans, but there are plenty of options available in your supermarket. You could also make up your own, with some combination of garlic powder, onion powder, cayenne, black pepper, thyme and salt.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place a heavy saucepan over medium heat. Add vegetable broth, garlic, salt and pepper, and heat to nearly boiling. Add polenta, stirring constantly until it is fully mixed with the broth and no visible clumps appear. Reduce heat to medium low and cook, stirring frequently, until most of the liquid is absorbed.
2. Add hot water, 1/2 cup at a time, and continue with frequent stirring until each addition is absorbed and grits take on a smooth, creamy appearance. This may be up to 2 cups of additional liquid, and may take as long as 40 minutes.
3. When grits achieve desired consistency, add a few shakes of RedHot sauce and stir in the light cream. Stir in shredded cheddar until melted and smooth. Remove grits from heat and cover to keep warm until you are ready to assemble the dish with the shrimp and other ingredients.
4. Season the prepared shrimp with a few shakes of Cajun dry seasoning, and toss to let the flavor meld with the shrimp. Don't give in to the urge to fully coat the shrimp; you want the flavor to complement, not overtake this delicate seafood.
5. Place a large skillet over medium heat. Add a tablespoon of olive oil and brown the andouille sausage bits until they have slightly crispy edges. Add the sliced mushrooms to the pan, tossing to brown them on both sides. Transfer sausage and mushrooms to a bowl.
6. In the same skillet, again over medium heat, swirl in another tablespoon of olive oil. When oil is shimmering, place shrimp into the pan, one at a time. Allow them to cook, undisturbed, about one minute, then begin turning them, following the same order, to cook the other side.
7. Add the cooked sausage and mushrooms back to the skillet and give the whole thing a few quick tosses to heat everything through.
8. Spoon a generous amount of grits onto your serving bowls or plates, top with sausage, shrimp and mushrooms. Sprinkle dish with scallions and serve.