

Johnny Cake Know How

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Today's rant involves the often heard of Johnny-cake. This cornmeal flatbread has been acknowledged by many names ranging from Johnny-cake, to Shawnee cake, to Johnny bread. This bread is an older, staple prepared and used in the early days of our country. We can credit the Native American's with the creation of this food and even today it can be found in countries such as the Bahamas, Bermuda, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Saint Croix, and West Indies.

The modern version of the Johnny-cake bread originates from the New England cuisine especially around the area of Rhode Island. The modern version of this corn based food consists of fried yellow or white cornmeal mixed with a pinch of salt and an equal amount of hot water. In place of the hot water some advocate the use of milk as a substituted and for those sporting a sweet tooth, sugar or honey could "sweetly" solve that dilemma. If you happen to be traveling through the southern states you may hear Johnny-cake referred to as a Hoe-cake. In venturing back in the annuals of history we quickly discover that the term "Johnny-cake" was found to be in use as far back as 1739 as a common name for this type of bread in the area of South Carolina, while it was referred to in 1775, as a "Journey-cake" by the population on the Gulf Coast.

Keep in mind, that the Native American tribes were employing ground corn for their meals long before the European explorers invaded the New World. The Johnny-cake can be contributed to the Algonquians nation of the Atlantic seaboard as it was they who taught the European explorers how to make the food. Several Native America cultures in the south (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek) can lay claim towards contributing to this tasty Southern cuisine. We find that it was the Native Americans who are credited with adding maize or corn to the southern diet. Corn became the ingredient in many dishes from cornbread and grits to even some liquor-like whiskey. Cornbread remained a popular food up to and during the American Civil War simply because it was inexpensive and money was scarce at that time. Some versions of Johnny-cake were made from such ingredients as rice or hominy flour according to where it was made.

We mentioned above that another version of the Johnny-cake is the Hoe-cake. Generally, the Johnny-cake was made atop a board which was placed in the fire or oven. When one side of the cake was finished cooking it would be turned over so that the opposite side could finish baking. In the event that a board was unavailable for this task, the imaginative cook would employ a common garden hoe. The hoe would be cleaned well and bear's oil rubbed over it. The bread dough baked in this manner was called Hoe-cakes thus the difference between the two is only in how they are baked.

Traditionally, to make Johnny-cakes you would need to take as much meal as you think you will eat, some salt, and enough clean water to allow you to knead the mixture. Mix the batch well and allow it to rest for about twenty minutes. This should be enough time to allow all the meal to be saturated with the water. Bake these cakes on a griddle or in the oven, but in either case, the temperature must be hot enough to bake, but not high enough to burn. This recipe has evolved over the years and below is a more modern version of the recipe:

Ingredients

- 1 cup of white cornmeal
- 1 tablespoon of butter
- 1 teaspoon of salt
- 1 tablespoon of sugar
- 1 cup of boiling water
- ¼ cup of milk
- Bacon drippings to suit

Combine the cornmeal, butter, salt, and the sugar with the boiling water and the milk. Mix the ingredients into a dense batter. Heat up the bacon drippings in a skillet and spoon the batter into the pan in ½ inch thick cakes. When finished the cakes should display a golden-brown color. You can eat them plain or serve them up with butter or honey. For an added treat, you can mix dried fruits or raisins into the batter and pour syrup on top of them. You owe it to yourself to try this old-time recipe at least once.