

Polenta with White Beans and Collard Greens

One of the great “ah-ha” moments for me just a few weeks into my lifestyle modification was that many of the same techniques I was discovering were essential to cook tasty foods without meat, oil, dairy, and with no excessive salt, fat, sugar, or processed foods were the very same techniques I saw people use to cook what we call “peasant food” at various stages in my career as a Chef. These are some of the tastiest foods there are out there and they are born out of food insecurity. The meat, oil, dairy, and expensive processed flavoring agents like bases and stocks are things originally left out of these peasant foods and that’s exactly what we need to do in the healthier versions as well!



This is a complete meal prepared in five stages. There’s nothing in it that costs over \$1.00 a pound in late summer – at least in 2010 – except the onions which were just over a dollar a pound. The only condiments are Bragg’s Aminos and granulated garlic, no bases or pre-made stocks of any kind are used at all. I do use some home grown oregano, but no expensive bottled herbs or flavoring agents are utilized. What we *do use* are several techniques to acquire and retain flavor without using anything that costs a lot of money and coincidentally nothing that adds things we don’t want in the food due to health considerations.

Start by preparing some roasted peppers following the attached recipe. Remember to retain all of that wonderful liquor that comes off of the peppers. Use green peppers instead of the red peppers the recipe calls for. Then caramelize 3 or 4 medium onions using the attached recipe. Be patient, the darker the better, and if you burn them, don’t try and use them; just start over. Next prepare the white beans and collard greens and step up to the polenta last. Making polenta isn’t a long process and it doesn’t hold hot very well so do it last and go right to the plate and on to the table when it’s completed.

Plain Braised White Beans

Great Northern Beans	1-2 cups
Water	to cover+
Onion	1 med
Celery	1-2 med stalk
Home Grown Herbs	to taste
Roasted pepper Liquor	
Bragg's Aminos	(2 tsp) to taste
Roasted Green Peppers	1-2 med
Salt and Pepper	to taste



Since food insecurity is the theme here, let's not cook with the \$150 pressure cooker I adore and just use a pot sturdy enough to hold water. Soak the beans over night, strain and discard the water. Place the beans, vegetables, herbs, and pepper liquor in the pot and barely cover with water. Be very careful with the amount of water you use. When you have the luxury of adjusting the flavor with expensive flavoring agents like bases and stocks you don't have to be so careful with the amount of water, but when you don't have access to those things the water indicates the concentration of flavors.

The more water, the lower concentration of flavor; the less water, the higher concentration of flavor. What we want is just enough liquid to suspend the beans and keep them from sticking to the pan. Watch the flame also, when working with limited amounts of water evaporation and consequential scorching becomes something you want to watch out for. Cooking this way demands a much higher level of awareness or what I refer to as "conscious cooking." Some of the most talented cooks I've learned from in my now 35 years behind the range have learned their craft cooking just what they could afford with little or no equipment. To create good food without access to expensive ingredients and fancy kitchen toys displays true mastery and genuine expertise.

Simmer everything until the beans soften and some start to break apart. This will thicken the beans and keep us from using another ingredient – corn starch – or a piece of expensive equipment; a food processor. Dice the peppers and add them in, the more towards the end you add the peppers the more they will stay together. Season with Bragg's, salt, and pepper and set aside.

One note on the peppers; where as I wouldn't suggest using an actual wood fire to provide the initial roast on the peppers for any other dish because it might just be too smoky, in this case it might be an advantage to impart a heavy smoke to the beans. If you do that, make sure that the charcoal is well past burning at its highest and only allow the skin to brown, then finish the peppers in the oven per the recipe.

Plain Braised Collard Greens

Collard Greens	1-2 bunches
Water	to cover+
Granulated Garlic	(2 tsp) to taste
Bragg's Aminos	(2 tsp) to taste
Caramelized Onions	3-4 med
Salt and Pepper	to taste



In the middle of summer most of the field greens sold in the United States will be relatively local and with very few exceptions will be those really tough greens you see with stems as hard as pencils. If that's the case you'll need to pull the stems away from the leaves, chop the stems up and cook them ahead of time. Strain them and retain that liquid. Chop the leaves and start them in that reserved liquid with the granulated garlic. When the leaves are about the same color as the pre-cooked stems, toss the stems into the pot and simmer until the greens are tender. The same thing about the level of water holds true for the greens, add just enough to barely cover them to preserve the concentration of flavors in that liquid. Add the caramelized onion, the Bragg's, and salt and pepper. Save a small amount of the onions for a garnish if you'd like.

Many recipes for greens in the South call for vinegar. I would refrain from using vinegar here because it will fight the flavors from the caramelized onions and Bragg's; do one or the other.

Polenta with Corn and Onion

Yellow Grits aka "polenta"	2 cups
Water	6 cups (-)
Granulated Garlic	(1 tsp) to taste
Onion	1 med
Corn Cobs	2-3 med
Salt and Pepper	to taste

Restaurants use a ton of cheese, butter, and stock in polenta, that's why everyone likes it – it's the salt and fat – not that coarse ground corn meal is a national favorite! Since we're not going to use any stock, butter, or cheese in this recipe we need to get some flavor up in these here grits somehow! In as little water as possible steam the cobs of corns. Retain the water and cool the

corn, but not under running water. Strain the water to get out any strands of silt that are in it and use that as part of the 6 cups of liquid. That (-) indicates that you want to hold some of that 6 cups back, maybe as much as a cup so that you have better control over the consistency of the polenta, stay on the wet, not the dry side of that equation and adjust with the withheld water. Boil the water, add the onion and granulated garlic. Cut the kernels off of the cob and toss those in as well. At a good boil add the corn meal and stir. The better and more intense job you do stirring, the smoother the polenta will be. That's not always my greatest concern, sometimes I like a more rustic polenta and that would be fine here. This will take no more than 5 minutes. Correct the seasoning and you're done! Save some of the kernels of corn for a garnish if you desire.