

THE FEARLESS OLIVE
BY REEMA ISLAM



Simple corn

Of all the 'chotpotis' and 'fuchkas' that we can gorge on, a simple charred 'bhutta' sold on the street side maintains its own place as a healthy, staple snack that also passes off as a fast food! This week I take a look at how corn has travelled across the globe to become one of the most recognised food items today. From popcorn to corn flour, let us celebrate the diversity of the amazing maize!

Archaeological evidence has shown that corn was first domesticated in the Tehuacan Valley of Mexico. Maize was possibly farmed about 70,000 years ago but the corn we eat today was a result of successful cross breeding by those past farmers. Through trial and error they reached a stage where corn became such an immense part of their diet that they took it with them wherever they travelled.

Columbus is said to have brought it back with him to Europe and from there India got its corn which we popularly call 'bhutta'. However, this is the popular notion that corn was a Western influence. But a closer look at the Halebidu caves of the 13th century CE (current era) Hoysala Kingdom in Karnataka, India, show some of the statues holding corn. This does suggest that there was already a possible presence of this maize in this region as South India had already started trade with the Western hemisphere long before the rest of India.

The corn we eat today is of a new kind, its wild varieties have long been extinct. Also, baby corn is not even considered corn. It is more like a bonsai of the original that even tastes different! So whether boiled, roasted or popped at the movie theatre, we all love our corn one way or the other!

Before we start off, corn meal or flour made out of corn or 'bhutta' has become a rare sight in Dhaka especially as the processing is not done on a mass scale so resort to home spun tactics and make your own!

The Fearless Olive suggests you take a corn cob, roast it over a fire then grind the slightly dehydrated corn kernels and mix this with ¼ of whichever flour you are using. It is a perfect substitute to the tragedy of the missing corn meal in the markets!

Health focus

This grain contains several essential vitamins, thiamin and niacin, where thiamin maintains nerve health and cognitive functions, and a deficiency of niacin can lead to Pellagra, a disease characterised by diarrhea, dementia and dermatitis.

Corn cakes

Ingredients:

- ½ cup whole-wheat flour
- ¼ cup cornmeal
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp sugar
- ½ tsp baking soda
- ½ cup milk
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup corn kernels
- ½ cup shredded white Dhaka Poneer cheese (you may substitute with cheddar cheese)
- Pinch of deshi ghee
- ½ bombai morich or 2-3 green chillies which have turned red, chopped
- 2 tbsp olive oil

Method

Whisk together the flour, cornmeal, salt, sugar and baking soda in a large bowl until incorporated. Whisk together the milk and eggs in a separate bowl. Pour the milk mixture into the dry ingredients and add the corn, cheese, ghee and chillies then mix well.

Heat 1 tbsp of the oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Use an ice-cream scoop to pour the batter for each cake. Cook until golden, about 2 minutes per side. About halfway through cooking, add the remaining oil to the skillet. Transfer the cakes to a plate lined with paper towels to drain and sprinkle with sea salt, if desired.

Serving

Serve warm with mint yoghurt topping.

Health focus:

Corn contains great amounts of phosphorus, magnesium, manganese, zinc, iron and copper and trace elements such as selenium. These combine together in maintaining normal bone growth, bone health and kidney functions. Magnesium, especially, plays an important role in regulating the heart rate and strengthening bones.

Humintas

Consumed almost all over Central America and Mexico, Humintas is an iconic dish that most South Americans can identify with and is prepared en masse inside homes during important events. Steamed and tied with a string, Humintas can be the new entry to your collection of 'paturi' dishes.

Ingredients

- 4-5 fresh, ripe corn (grind the corn until you get a paste, not entirely smooth).
- Pinch of salt, cinnamon powder, anise powder, ghee
- Make a paste of chillies using 4-5 green ones that have turned red



- One or two eggs
- 1 tsp brown sugar
- 1 tsp baking powder

Method

Mix everything properly except for the cheese. You may check the texture as eggs make the mix too watery so try to avoid that. Open the corn husks, use a couple of husks inverted, take a husk and turn the round ends inwards with inner side pointing out then place another one beneath it so you can ultimately wrap them. Put a couple of tablespoons in the middle of the husk. In the middle add grated cheese. Close the humintas with a tie made with the husks. (you can use the husks to cut out strings). Place these in a steamer for up to 40 minutes and stick a toothpick in to see whether done. If the toothpick comes out clean you are ready to serve.

Serving

Serve as a side dish to a rice based meal or simply over tea as *nashta*.

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed