



You've seen this ingredient everywhere...here's how to use it

Cornmeal might not sound exciting, but it's one of the most versatile—and globally beloved—grains out there. Whether it's labeled grits, polenta, or something else entirely, here's how to turn this simple gluten-free grain into something delicious.

What is cornmeal, and how does it become grits or polenta?

Cornmeal is simply dried corn that's been ground—finely, coarsely, or somewhere in between. But not all corn is the same. **Flint** corn, used in traditional Italian polenta, is hard and has a firm, gritty texture that holds up well during long cooking. **Dent** corn, used for grits in the American South, is softer and starchier, which makes for a creamier result.

Despite the differences, there's a lot of overlap in how these are used. Ground up corn is a staple in kitchens around the world:

- **Polenta (Italy):** Made from flint corn, polenta is slow-cooked and served creamy or firm, often topped with cheese, butter, or hearty sauces.
- **Grits (U.S. South):** A comfort food made from dent corn, served savory or sweet—especially popular as a breakfast dish or alongside shrimp and greens.
- **Mămăligă (Romania):** Similar to polenta, this cornmeal porridge is often paired with salty cheese, sour cream, or rich stews.
- **Funchi (Caribbean):** Found in places like Curaçao and Aruba, this stiff cornmeal side dish is served with stewed fish or okra.
- **Sadza (Zimbabwe), ugali (East Africa), and nsima (Malawi/Zambia):** These thick cornmeal porridges are essential to daily meals, typically eaten with vegetables or stew by hand.

Health benefits

Corn is packed with energy-boosting complex carbohydrates. When eaten as a whole grain—meaning the bran and germ are still intact—it also provides fiber for digestion, B vitamins for energy metabolism, iron, and antioxidants like lutein and zeaxanthin that support eye health. Recent research suggests that whole-grain corn products may help lower the risk of chronic conditions like heart disease and type 2 diabetes, thanks to their nutrient and fiber content. ([Read about it here!](#))

Stone-ground and whole-grain cornmeal varieties retain more of these benefits, while refined versions (like most instant grits) lose much of that goodness during processing.

As for GMOs: Most corn in the U.S. is genetically modified, but unless it's organic, labeled non-GMO, or imported from Italy, it's hard to avoid. There's no current evidence that GMO corn poses health risks, but choosing organic or non-GMO is a personal preference many people feel strongly about.

What am I even buying at the store?

If you've stood in the grains aisle feeling confused, you're not alone. Here's a quick guide:

- **Plain cornmeal (usually labeled fine, medium, or coarse):** Super versatile. You can make grits or polenta with it, or bake cornbread, muffins, or crusts.
- **Polenta (bagged):** Typically medium-coarse cornmeal made from flint corn. Great for creamy dishes or sliceable polenta.
- **Polenta logs:** Pre-cooked polenta that's firm and ready to slice, grill, or sauté.
- **Grits (regular):** Coarsely ground dent corn. Creamy and soft when cooked slowly.
- **Instant or quick grits:** Ground more finely and precooked so they rehydrate faster—convenient, but often less flavorful or nutritious.
- **Hominy grits:** Made from corn that's been nixtamalized (soaked in an alkaline solution), which adds a distinctive flavor and changes the texture.

So what should you buy? If you want flexibility, a bag of medium- or coarse-ground plain cornmeal will get you far—you can use it for soft grits, creamy polenta, baking, or even breakfast porridge. Just expect different textures and cooking times depending on the grind.

Can I substitute in recipes?

Mostly, yes. You can often use regular cornmeal to make grits or polenta-style dishes, and vice versa. The biggest differences come down to grind size, corn variety, and cooking time—not hard rules about what's "allowed."

For example, coarser cornmeal makes heartier grits or rustic polenta, while finer grinds cook faster and yield a smoother texture. Instant grits rehydrate quickly, while stone-ground versions may take 30–45 minutes.

If you're new to cornmeal cooking, go slow, stir often, and use plenty of liquid. Add-ins like butter, cheese, or broth help boost flavor and smoothness—and most recipes are flexible enough to handle some improvising.

Cornmeal is one of those ingredients that quietly does it all—comfort food, cultural staple, and whole-grain hero. Whether you're baking cornbread, crisping up polenta fries, or serving savory mushroom polenta for dinner, it's worth getting to know.

Savory Mushroom Polenta



This cozy dinner uses both fresh mushrooms and pantry-friendly dried soup mix for deep, umami flavor.

Ingredients:

- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup medium or coarse cornmeal (or labeled "polenta")
- $3\frac{1}{2}$ cups water or low-sodium vegetable broth (plus more as needed)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh mushrooms, sliced thinly
- 3 tablespoons dried mushroom soup mix (you can also substitute $\frac{1}{4}$ dried mushroom pieces plus a vegetable bouillon cube; if you do, soak both mushrooms and bouillon in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup very hot water for 15 minutes before adding to the pot)
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme or rosemary
- 2 tablespoons plant-based butter or olive oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated Parmesan or nutritional yeast
- Black pepper, to taste
- Fresh parsley, chopped (optional)

Instructions:

1. In a skillet, heat oil and sauté onion and garlic until softened. Add fresh mushrooms, thyme, and pepper. Cook until golden and fragrant. Set aside.
2. In a saucepan, bring $3\frac{1}{2}$ cups water to a boil. Slowly whisk in the cornmeal. Add soup mix (or soaked dried mushrooms and bouillon). Reduce heat and stir frequently for 25–30 minutes, until thick and creamy. Add more water if needed.
3. Stir in butter or oil, and cheese or nutritional yeast. Taste and adjust seasoning.
4. Spoon into bowls and top with the mushroom mixture. Garnish with parsley if you're feeling fancy.

Want it sliceable? Pour the cooked polenta into a dish, let it cool and firm up, then slice and pan-fry.

Other ways to use cornmeal in your cooking:

- **Cornbread or corn muffins** – a classic use, either savory or sweet
- **Cornbread-topped casseroles** – like chili bakes or tamale pies
- **As a crust** – for tofu, fish, or eggplant slices before baking or pan-frying
- **For crunch** – sprinkle on a pizza peel or pan to prevent sticking and add texture
- **In baking** – sub a portion into pancake or waffle batter for a rustic feel
- **Thickeners** – stir into soups or stews to add body and texture
- **Porridge** – sweet breakfast-style with cinnamon, fruit, and milk
- **Polenta fries or wedges** – chill and slice firm polenta, and bake or fry
- **Dumplings or spoonbread** – soft, scoopable sides made with cornmeal batter

