

New Year's cornbread

BY BRIAN MEDFORD

I love indulging in New Year's culinary traditions.

Many claim to bring luck, happiness and financial success for the year ahead, and are significantly tastier than a lotto ticket.

The few New Year's food traditions I'm not a fan of include the words diet, restriction, fat-free or no-dairy. To each their own, but I know that's not for me.

My most familiar New Year's tradition is from the South, called Hoppin' John. This pork flavored dish includes black-eyed peas, rice and is served with cooked greens and cornbread. It's meant to bring luck and prosperity (the components symbolize coins, money and gold) in the new year.

Food historians trace Hoppin' John's roots to West African traditions. The components of the dish were brought over by slaves to North America. Recipes appeared as early as the 1840s, although enslaved people in South Carolina's low country surely made it long before then.

My favorite part of the Hoppin' John tradition is the cornbread.

Southerners will argue for the rest of time about what does and doesn't belong in a cornbread. Flour mixed with cornmeal or cornmeal only; sugar or no sugar; bacon fat or butter. This conversation is essentially like mixing fire and gasoline.

A California native friend once asked me how to make cornbread if she didn't have any bacon grease on hand. I told her, "You cook some bacon."

My only cornbread requirement is that it's made in cast iron, although I have enjoyed more than my fair share of Jiffy mix muffins from aluminum pans.

No matter your New Year's food tradition, whether it's tamales, king cake, soba noodles, pickled herring, or Hoppin' John, make it how you want it. The way your mom or your grandma made it.

Celebrate the New Year with food and indulge in knowing that generations before you and generations after you will do the same. That family food connection is what makes us happy and prosperous every single year. Let's celebrate.

Cornbread

Slightly adapted from Mrs. Esther Mae Archie and Toni Tipton-Martin

- 1 cup fine cornmeal
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 large egg, beaten
- 1 1/4 cup buttermilk, well-shaken
- 6 tablespoons unsalted butter (or bacon grease)

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

In a large bowl, whisk together the dry ingredients. Stir in the egg and buttermilk until just mixed. Set aside.

Place the butter in a 9" or 10" cast iron skillet and heat until the butter is foamy. Remove the skillet from the oven and swirl the butter to coat the bottom and sides of the hot skillet. Then pour the hot butter into the batter and mix well.

Immediately pour the batter back into the skillet and return to the oven. Bake until golden brown, about 16 to 20 minutes depending on pan size.

Slather with salted butter and honey to serve.

Brian Medford is the owner of Idlewild Biscuits and Bakes in Astoria. He teaches cooking classes at The Pantry in Seattle. Contact him at blmedford@gmail.com.

A BREW FOR THE MASSES

Brewers thrilled by city's status as a beer haven

BY WILLIAM DEAN

Even the folks making all this world-class beer call it crazy.

Maybe dizzying is a better word. It's all happened so fast, this transformation into a year-round destination for craft beer lovers.

In Astoria, population 10,000, six breweries will soon be producing a tantalizing array of barrel-aged sours and stouts, hazy and juicy IPAs and thirst-quenching lagers, to name a few.

While quality is always the goal, the sheer volume of suds is amazing. The city's breweries combined now fill more than 50,000 barrels a year. That's 1.55 million gallons, or put in a more beer-friendly way, an astounding 12,400,000 pints.

That's fine, you say, but Portland has way more breweries making way more beer. So does Bend.

True. On a per capita basis, however, those brewtopias come up short.

When Obelisk Beer Co. opens its doors on Bond Street this spring, joining Buoy Beer, Fort George Brewery, Astoria Brewing, Reach Break Brewing and Hondo's Brew & Cork, there will be one brew-house per 1,700 Astorians (including children and adults under 21).

Portland, aka "Beervana," currently boasts some 75 craft breweries serving a population within the city limits of roughly 663,000, or one per 8,800. Bend, blessed with 21 breweries at last count, has a per capita rate of approximately one per 5,000.

Such comparisons aren't worth much, but they do serve to illustrate Astoria's emergence as a hub for beer enthusiasts.

It's a relatively new phenomenon. Fort George was founded in 2007. Buoy came along in 2013. Reach Break launched four years ago. It now appears that a critical mass has been reached in terms of developing brewing talent and luring hop-savvy visitors.

Brian Bovenizer, Fort George's marketing and sales director, recalls



A bit of humor at the Astoria Brewing taproom, which overlooks the brewhouse.



Nathaniel Corwin pours beer at the scenic Buoy Beer brewpub.

a recent trip to Seattle's Ballard neighborhood, where a craft beer district has blossomed. At breweries there, though, everyone he talked to raved about Astoria — and its own walkable, weekend-worthy beer zone.

"I think it's fantastic," he said. "Without that tourism aspect, there's no way we can support this many breweries."

If Astoria can keep up with demand for hotel rooms, the future looks bright. A scenic town with a cluster of innovative breweries is a magnet not just for tourists, but for people settling down in the Pacific Northwest.

"Oregon is just one of those states where there's a passion for craft beer," says Christina LaRue, executive director of the Oregon Brewers Guild. "People ask me

Brews and News

• Reach Break Brewing has spruced up its taproom in time for winter after a nearly two-year hiatus caused by the pandemic. The new space, featuring soft lighting and barrel tables, can seat up to 28 people, according to co-founder Josh Allison. The long bar in back remains.

• The sea lion viewing spot on the east side of the new Bowline Hotel next to Buoy Beer is worth checking out. The whiskered sea mammals can be seen resting on a platform directly below a deck cutout. Bark on, my friends.

• Astoria Brewing aims to widen its distribution with the recent purchase of a canning machine for its downtown brewhouse. Head brewer John Dalgren says the equipment is capable of producing 850 cans of beer in less than an hour. The brewery has never canned before, but soon fans of Poop Deck Porter and Strawberry Blonde will be able to purchase six-packs at regional markets.

if we're going to reach maximum capacity, but we continue to see growth in demand as people move here."

But, seriously, six breweries in Astoria?

"Crazy, huh?" said Michal Frankowicz, head brewer at Fort George, which recently completed a major waterfront expansion. There's room for more breweries here, he believes, calling it a trend that benefits both locals and tourists.

The owner of the city's smallest brewhouse agrees. RJ Kiepke of Hondo's figures the frothy wave will "float all boats," including his Marine Drive establishment.

"My taproom will benefit and so will everyone else's," he said.

William Deann is an author with a passion for craft beer. His new suspense novel 'The Ghosts We Know' is available at Amazon and in bookstores. Column ideas? Contact him at williamdeanbooks@gmail.com.