

Getty Images Photo/Lauri Patterson

A bowl of creamy cheese grits. Food writer Erin Byers Murray hopes that exploring the story of grits will help spur more discussion about how food shapes our culture, as humble ingredients are elevated into expensive dishes even as we come to terms with long-lost, or ignored, origin stories that deserve recognition.

Saving the story of grits

A dish born of poverty now on fine-dining menus

By KRISTEN HARTKE Oregon Public Broadcasting

ASHINGTON — Like many food writers, Erin Byers Murray enjoys taking a deep dive into learning the history and nuances of specific ingredients. For her first book, "Shucked," Murray chronicled the year that she spent working on a New England oyster farm; her second book,

"Grits: A Cultural and Culinary Journey Through The South," however, led her on an unexpected cultural journey about the simplest of ingredients: ground corn.

I was used to knowing grits only as something that came in a box from mass producers," Murray says. "I didn't really grow up eating them, so it wasn't necessarily a natural fit as a topic for me."

It was a passing comment from Sean Brock, a James Beard Award-winning Southern chef, that led Murray down the rabbit hole. "I was actually talking to Sean about vegetables, and he happened to float out this idea that grits have terroir" whereby the local environment in which a food is grown is said to impact its flavor — "and I couldn't stop thinking about that idea and wondered if it could be

But as she started sampling small-batch artisanal grits from Southern millers such as Anson

Mills, Geechie Boy Mill, Delta Grind and Original Grit Girl, Murray began to understand that this coarsely ground corn has deep roots in many cultures that, perhaps, transcend its flavor characteristics.

"Talking to people about grits started to open up all these conversations about bigger things,' says Murray. "I had just recently moved to the South, and it seemed like the people who were erty. Grits is the porridge of poor Southerners."

Alice Randall, a novelist and cookbook author who teaches courses on both soul food and Southern food at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., sees grits as a food specifically associated with the South but not necessarily with a race or even a gender (although they were most commonly cooked by women in earlier history). "Grits are inhering and showcasing Indigenous cooking through The Sioux Chef project, and William Thomas, an African American pathologist who worked with Cherokee natives Nancy and Tony Plemmons on their cookbook "Cherokee Cooking: From the Mountains and Gardens to the Table," led Murray to wonder how long grits — or some version of them — had been cooked for nourishment.

ing into the archaeology, technology and agriculture of grits while researching her book, the most consistent theme seemed to be that of nostalgia — and comfort. Murray's conversations with cooks, farmers and millers sparked deep-seated memories. She says: "You can talk about artisanal producers and the evolution of shrimp and grits in fine dining, but when you get down to it, it's about the memory of

> someone — maybe your mom or your grandma or your uncle — standing at a stove and stirring. It's the definition of slow food."

> "I think there are people who will wonder why grits are

such a big deal," Willis, the cookbook author, says, "but grits are found all over the South at almost every meal. Even when you go to someone's house when someone dies, there's going to be a cheese grits casserole on the table. I call them 'funeral grits' because it's pure comfort food."

Grits, Murray hopes, will help spur more discussion about how food shapes our culture, as humble ingredients are elevated into expensive dishes even as we come to terms with longlost, or ignored, origin stories that deserve recognition.

"The real story of the book wasn't just this dish," says Murray, "but how I could look at this place where I lived and get to know its people better simply by talking about grits."

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Erin Byers Murray, author of "Grits: A Cultural and Culinary Journey Through The South"

reviving grits as a food didn't really match its origins. I was realizing that there was more to this than just following the dish through history.'

Interest in grits has been fueled in recent years as farmers have revived heirloom varieties of corn branded with evocative names like Jimmy Red, Pencil Cob, Carolina Gourdseed White and Hopi Blue, but it has not been lost on Murray and others that a food originally cooked in the kitchens of the impoverished has found its champions in recent decades among white male chefs leading fine-dining restaurants.

"The South has always been poor," says Grits cookbook author Virginia Willis, "and so our food is a food born of povently Southern, so they identify as a taste of the South across cultures," she says.

Murray theorizes that grits can be traced back much further than to the kitchens run by African American and white women in the antebellum South.

"For grits, every major pivot point in the story line involves appropriation," writes Murray in her book. "It started with the fateful naming of the bowl of cracked maize." It's said that British colonists arriving in Virginia were presented by Indigenous people with steaming bowls of this maize, a dish that the colonists began referring to as "grist," which later morphed into "grits."

Interviews with Sean Sherman, a member of the Oglala Lakota who has been preserv-

"The evidence exists," says Murray, "that corn was being milled in 8700 B.C. in Central America. There must have been a dish of ground corn and water cooked over heat. It's a food product that's not just historic — it's

Randall, of Vanderbilt, likes seeing the rising interest in grits. "The essence of soul food is preserving and evolving at the same time," she says. "What we are seeing in the 21st century with grits is some distillation of that: what we learn by refining and processing, as well as what we learn by going back to milling them in the old ways. It's an ongoing study of the evolution and preservation of a food item."

Even while Murray was delv-

Airport shortcuts can ease the rush to the gate

By CHRISTOPHER **ELLIOTT** Special to the

Washington Post

WASHINGTON — How long will it take to get from your curb to your gate? If you're Lonny MacLeod, the answer is: a lot less time than you think.

Flying from Orlando, Florida, to Halifax, Nova Scotia, on one of the busiest air-travel days of the year, he took no chances. MacLeod paid an extra \$200 for Blacklane PASS, an airport concierge service that helps you check your luggage, finds the fastest check-in option, gives you access to a faster security line, then escorts you to

"I saved at least half an hour at the airline check-in counter and another 30 minutes at my gate," says MacLeod, a retired high school teacher from New



AP Photo/Susan Walsh

A passenger talks on the phone as American Airlines jets sit parked at their gates at Ronald

Glasgow, Nova Scotia, who adds that he was surprised by the speed.

For summer travelers

Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington, Virginia

headed to the airport, it's a question that looms large: How long will it take to get to the gate, or from termi-

nal to terminal? A concierge service such as Blacklane is just one shortcut for summer travelers who are worried

about missing their flights.

AirHelp publishes airport satisfaction scores, which factor in average transit times. But the times fluctuate. For example, at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, transit times are between 35 and 85 minutes, depending on your destination. Instead of relying on one source for airport transit times, experts say, you need to factor in several variables. One is the airport map, which few travelers bother to review before departure. Almost every major airport has a detailed map on its website.

What about the security lines? The Transportation Security Administration's mobile app, called MyTSA, provides wait-time averages

based on the day and time that you are traveling. Another app worth considering: Terminal Buddy

(iOS only), a mobile app

that offers flight status, live

wait times for check-in and security and terminal maps. That's what Fares Khalidi, a frequent traveler who works for a travel start-up company in Boca Raton, Florida, uses. He says he finds the wait times are accurate.

"I use Terminal Buddy because it has the wait times and the information on the airport, including food, lounges and maps, which I might need in case I find myself with more time than I thought," he says.

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