FORK IN THE ROAD

Our Daily Bread
Carmen Juch

I remember my Grandmother eating cornbread in a glass of buttermilk with a little sugar. I thought that was "ewwww-icky". Since those days, I learned that dish was considered a "soul food dessert". Who knew?

We ate homemade (no, not from a box, actually *homemade*) cornbread, ham hocks and collard greens, butter beans, turnips and "scratch biscuits". My family was eating "soul food" before it was cool. Of course, these types of recipes seem to start with lard, bacon grease or butter in a skillet. I thought we grew our own vegetables because we were cheap. I thought that hunting rabbit, squirrel, or fishing was for sport. Now I know the truth. We were po' folk and doing what it took to get through to the next day.

I would not have had it any other way because I know things it seems a lot of people don't. I know for sure what a real tomato tastes like and it has no resemblance with those lying in heaps at the supermarket. I know the taste of springtime in a cucumber and sunshine in just picked corn off the stalk. And I appreciate that a *really* great meal, made from fresh ingredients must be served along with real homemade bread. Not that stuff in a can, or that frozen substance; the real thing, straight from the oven with melting butter dripping down your forearm. As close to Heaven as we will get on this earth.

It's the finishing touch. Okay, maybe we don't want to do the little trick with the bacon grease that was used to dip the biscuits in before baking, but still what is life really without a little bread?

Contrary to what many people believe, biscuits can be so simple. I cringe when I see those little frozen discs at the grocery or the canisters claiming the insides are "poppin' fresh". Yes, I can understand the attraction when you really must hurry and I know you can deep fry them to make little donuts but please just occasionally try to make some truly fresh biscuits. It can be life changing...okay, maybe I am overly dramatic. *MAYBE.*

I have simplified these two recipes from those my family used. Even the laziest should feel no real effort in stirring together these minimal ingredients and serving up hot biscuits with gravy or honey or jam or just butter.

The "bonus" recipe my parents called "Fried Dough" - until we got "all-fancy" and started calling them "English Muffins" probably so the neighbors would not think us an extension of the "Beverly Hillbillies". We are talking three ingredients one of which is water and the other the oil for the pan. We had them practically every morning with butter, jam or jelly and peanut butter. (It was many years before I found out that not everyone ate peanut butter in the quantities my family ate it.)

Before we start let me explain the "Self Rising Flour" for anyone who hasn't heard of this time saving gift from the cooking goddess. You will hear some chiefs, especially pastry chefs, who think this is evil, but used in certain instances, it is a time saver; so, I have no problem with using it. Self-Rising flour has the salt and the

baking soda already included.

Good Ol' Biscuits

2 cups self rising flour
1 cup milk or buttermilk
Solid shortening like butter, margarine, lard or solid vegetable shortening at room temperature

If your shortening isn't at room temperature you would have to cut it into the flour first and you just make more work for yourself.

Dump the flour in a bowl, add the shortening and then the milk, and begin stirring. Quickly you will have a ball of dough that is a little on the sticky or moist side.

Roll out the dough, and you don't have to be perfect but make the dough about 1" thick. I don't even do that much I just take a spoon and cut the size I want on go straight to the baking sheet. Depending on the size of biscuits you may get anywhere from 6 to 10.

Now this is were you could dip the biscuit in some melted bacon grease but since we are being healthy these days, spray the pan with cooking spray and brush the tops with the oil or melted butter. Be sure your biscuits touch so that they puff upward and not spread outward.

Bake in a pre-heated 400-degree oven until the biscuits are light to medium golden brown. Once you have this recipe mastered, there are a million variations. You can add cheese and a little cayenne, replace the buttermilk with ½ yogurt and ½ regular milk, or add sugar and cinnamon for a breakfast version.

Now was that so hard? This one is even easier.

Fried Dough
aka "English Muffins"

This is really great if you have friends over and need to make a cheap and easy breakfast or a bread to make a sandwich. It's good with just butter, sugar and cinnamon or you can throw cheese, ham and an egg on it and have something more substantial. It's fried dough and not a real English muffin but you don't have to tell your friend. It can be our secret. You can call it whatever you wish but it is without a doubt, the simplest way to make a bread. With one ingredient and some water always on hand, you can feed people.

1 cup Self Rising Flour
Water

Place the flour in a bowl, pour a little water in, and stir. Keep adding water a little at a time until you end up with a sticky, gluey mixture about the consistency of a very thick pancake batter. You will have to "plop" into a pan.

Place a skillet on the stove and pour in enough oil that it will cover the entire bottom and be about 1/8" up the sides. When you are ready with the dough turn the skillet on and plop in your dough - about 4 separate muffins. Relax, they are going to touch but if you made the dough thick enough it won't become one big muffin.

Until you get good at timing these you will have to watch the muffins. When you start seeing a lot of bubbles popping on the surface the bottoms should be crispy and golden, time to flip them over. Once the other side becomes brown, they are done. The inside should not be doughy when you split them open. It they are then they need to cook them longer but if it is your first time and they are a bit sticky in the middle, they can be sliced down the middle and nuked a touch to finish them. Eventually you'll get the timing perfect.

Pass the butter and let's eat!

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