

Southern Corn Fritters

In our quest for fritters with fresh corn flavor, crispy exteriors, and pillow-soft centers, we learned that less is more.

≧ BY STEVE DUNN ≦

Ask a Northerner about corn fritters and you're sure to get, well, an earful: They'll describe crispy-on-the-outside, tender-on-the-inside dumplings dotted with fresh corn, deep-fried in a pot of oil, drizzled with honey or maple syrup, and served as a sweet treat. Southerners, on the other hand, will talk about fritters formed into patties and skillet-fried in a modest amount of oil. These contain cheese, herbs, and/or chiles and, accompanied by a dollop of creamy sauce, are served as a side dish or appetizer. As a Yankee, I have an affinity for the drenched-in-maple-syrup variety, but for this recipe I decided to focus my energies on the southern type.

To start, I dove into the world of southern corn fritters, researching dozens of recipes before settling on a handful to try in the test kitchen. The results ranged from fragile, barely there patties made with only whipped egg whites and fresh corn kernels to thick, stodgy disks in which corn seemed to be an afterthought. Versions with too many extra ingredients lost their corn soul, whereas those with too few were boring and bland. I wanted just enough batter to hold a patty shape and form a crispy exterior and a tender interior popping with sweet and savory corn flavor.

Mix Master

The first order of business was to order a bushel of corn and get to work on creating a batter that would give me a structurally sound fritter. I began by whisking together an ultrasimple mixture of just 2 tablespoons of flour, a beaten egg, baking powder, the kernels from two ears of corn, and some salt and pepper. The first thing I noticed was that the liquid-y batter just barely coated the corn kernels. I forged ahead, gently frying 2-tablespoon portions in ½ cup of vegetable oil—just enough to cover the bottom of a 12-inch skillet—until all the nooks and crannies of the fritters were evenly golden brown.

The result? Bland, cakey disks featuring one smooth side and a flip side pebbled with overcooked kernels. The thin batter spread too much in the skillet, settling into a uniform crust on the bottom



Heating the oil until it is shimmering before cooking the fritters ensures that they turn out crispy but not greasy.

of the fritter and leaving all the kernels exposed to the heat when I flipped it. Without any insulating batter, the bare kernels overbrowned and turned tough and chewy.

For the next go-round, I ditched the leavener since it was contributing to the unwelcome cakey texture. I also bumped up the amount of flour to ⅓ cup, hoping that more would thicken the batter

enough to support the kernels and keep them suspended. It worked, but the extra gluten made the fritters slightly tough. To the next batch I added cornmeal; alas, it only made the fritters cornbread-esque.

Then I got a better idea: How about creating a fresh corn puree that might thicken the batter without making the fritters cakey or heavy? I stripped the kernels from two cobs and blitzed them in the food processor into a chunky, starchy puree. I then stirred the puree together with just ¼ cup of flour, an egg, salt, and pepper. Finally, I folded in the kernels from two more ears of corn. Sure enough, this lightly thickened batter fully enrobed the corn, keeping the kernels suspended in the finished fritter. What's more, pureeing some of the kernels liberated their flavor, boosting the patties' overall corniness. The downside was that processing the kernels had freed so much of their milky liquid that the fritters were somewhat wet and custardy. To correct that problem, I tried cutting back on the amount of corn puree I was adding, but that resulted in less fresh corn flavor.

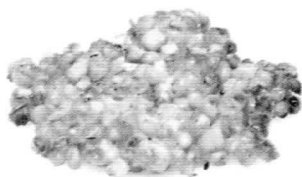
For my next attempt, I cooked the pulp in a skillet to rid it of moisture and lightly brown it, which helped develop complexity.

With this concentrated puree, the fritters had soft and tender—not gooey and wet—interiors.

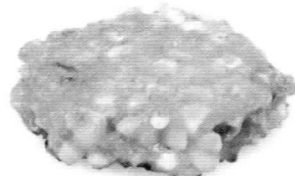
Lightly browning the corn puree had worked so well that I wondered if I should briefly sauté the whole kernels I was adding as well. It would be easy to do right before cooking the puree. Sure enough, this simple step gave the kernels a less sweet, more roasty profile.

Failed Fritters

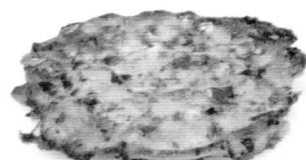
Our initial tests taught us that a proper balance of corn, batter, and flavorings was key.



An egg white batter has too much corn and no substance.



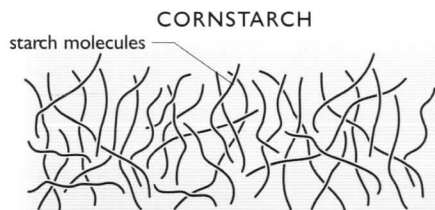
A thick, doughy batter produces a stodgy, heavy fritter.



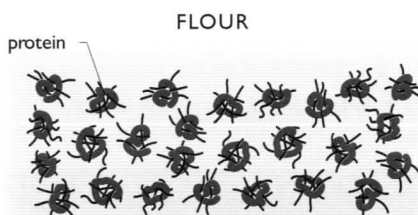
Bold mix-ins such as chiles and cheddar cheese mask corn flavor.

For Crispier Fritters, Try a Little Cornstarch

When our flour-based fritters turned out limp, we solved the problem by adding cornstarch: Its microscopic starch granules hydrate and swell into strand-like shapes in the batter and then swell up further when the batter hits the hot oil. As moisture evaporates during frying, the swollen starch granules lock into place, forming a brittle network with lots of holes. The upshot? Lacier, crispier fritters.



Cornstarch granules absorb water and swell, transforming into strand-like starch molecules. During cooking, the water evaporates and the strands link up, forming a lacy, crispy network.



In wheat flour, proteins act like rubber bands around the starch granules, restricting water absorption so that fewer starch strands develop. Fritters made with only flour were limp, not crispy.

Fritter Finesse

I wondered if I could do even more to balance the corn's sweetness, so I evaluated potential seasonings. I didn't want to add much, as simple corn goodness was my goal. I found that a couple of tablespoons of grated Parmesan brought just the right salty-umami counterpoint. I also settled on a pinch of cayenne for depth and some minced chives for color and earthy grassiness.

The only aspect of my fritters that I still wasn't crazy about was their exteriors, which tended toward limp rather than crispy. I knew that adding more flour would only toughen the fritters. Coating them with panko bread crumbs crisped up their exteriors—so much that the coating distracted from the tender kernels. Frying the fritters over higher heat or for a longer period only burned them in spots. I even played with taking the “fry” out of the fritters (the word “fritter” is derived from the French word for frying, *friture*) by cutting way back on the oil, but that rendered them dry and unevenly cooked.

TECHNIQUE

PRESS FOR BETTER TEXTURE

Pressing each portion of batter into a thin disk as soon as we drop it into the hot oil ensures that the fritters are evenly cooked and not gummy inside.



ILLUSTRATION: JAY LAYMAN

Finally, a colleague wondered if cornstarch might help. After a series of tests, I settled on stirring 1 tablespoon into the batter. This delivered fritters with a delicate crunch at their lacy edges. (For information on what the cornstarch did, see “For Crispier Fritters, Try a Little Cornstarch.”)

My testing came to a close after I'd created a couple of complementary sauces for my fritters, one of which included a little maple syrup in a nod to their northern cousins. While these tasty corn patties may not be my first fritter love, they've certainly earned a prominent place in my heart.

CORN FRITTERS

MAKES 12 FRITTERS

Serve these fritters as a side dish with steaks, chops, or poultry or as an appetizer with a dollop of sour cream or our Maple-Chipotle Mayonnaise or Red Pepper Mayonnaise (recipes follow). Our recipes for Basil Mayonnaise and Sriracha-Lime Yogurt Sauce are available for free for four months at CooksIllustrated.com/aug17.

- 4 ears corn, kernels cut from cobs (3 cups)
- 1 teaspoon plus ½ cup vegetable oil
- Salt and pepper
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- ¼ cup finely minced chives
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- Pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten

1. Process 1½ cups corn kernels in food processor to uniformly coarse puree, 15 to 20 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl halfway through processing. Set aside.

2. Heat 1 teaspoon oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add remaining 1½ cups corn kernels and ⅛ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring frequently, until light golden, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer to medium bowl.

3. Return skillet to medium heat, add corn puree and cook, stirring frequently with heatproof spatula until puree is consistency of thick oatmeal (puree clings to spatula rather than dripping off), about 5 minutes. Transfer puree to bowl with kernels and stir to combine. Rinse skillet and dry with paper towels.

4. Stir flour, 3 tablespoons chives, Parmesan, cornstarch, cayenne, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ⅛ teaspoon pepper into corn mixture until well combined. Gently stir in egg until incorporated.

5. Line rimmed baking sheet with paper towels. Heat remaining ½ cup oil in now-empty skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Drop six 2-tablespoon portions batter into skillet. Press with spatula to flatten into 2½- to 3-inch disks. Fry until deep golden brown on both sides, 2 to 3 minutes per side. Transfer fritters to prepared sheet. Repeat with remaining batter.

6. Transfer fritters to large plate or platter, sprinkle with remaining 1 tablespoon chives, and serve immediately.

MAPLE-CHIPOTLE MAYONNAISE

MAKES ¾ CUP

For the fullest maple flavor, use maple syrup labeled “Grade A, Dark Amber.”

- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup
- 1 tablespoon minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce
- ½ teaspoon Dijon mustard

Combine all ingredients in small bowl.

RED PEPPER MAYONNAISE

MAKES ABOUT 1¼ CUPS

Letting the minced garlic sit in the lemon juice mellows the garlic's flavor.

- 1½ teaspoons lemon juice
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ¾ cup jarred roasted red peppers, rinsed and patted dry
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 2 teaspoons tomato paste
- Salt

Combine lemon juice and garlic in small bowl and let stand for 15 minutes. Process red peppers, mayonnaise, tomato paste, and lemon juice mixture in food processor until smooth, about 15 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Season with salt to taste. Refrigerate until thickened, about 2 hours.

▶ Watch the Fritters Fry

A step-by-step video is available at CooksIllustrated.com/aug17

