

IN THE KITCHEN

Shrimp & grits to stir your soul

Cook up a tangy taste of New Orleans courtesy of Brenda's French Soul Food

By Sarah Fritsche



**Shrimp and
grits from
Brenda's French
Soul Food.**

John Lee / Special to The Chronicle

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RECIPE: BRENDA'S SHRIMP & GRITS WITH TOMATO-BACON RELISH

Serves 4

RELISH ¼ pound smoked bacon, cut crosswise into strips about ¼-inch thick 1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil ¼ medium red onion, diced (about ½ cup) 4 teaspoons minced garlic 1 cup diced tomatoes, some juice reserved 1½ to 2 teaspoons hot sauce like Tabasco or Crystal, or to taste ½ to 1 teaspoon dark brown sugar, or to taste ¾ teaspoon Sherry vinegar, or to taste Kosher salt and pepper, to taste

GRITS Pinch kosher salt 1 cup grits (Bob's Red Mill yellow grits preferred)

SHRIMP 1 cup grated sharp cheddar cheese, or about 2 ounces 2 tablespoons canola oil 2 teaspoons minced garlic 1 pound large shrimp, 26 to 30 count, peeled and deveined, tails on Kosher salt, to taste Freshly ground black pepper, to taste Cayenne pepper, to taste 1 cup dry white wine 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened Thinly sliced green onion, for garnish

TO MAKE THE RELISH: Line a plate with paper towels. Cook the bacon in a medium-size skillet over medium heat until it is crispy and the fat has rendered. Transfer to the paper towels to drain. Drain skillet and discard excess fat, while wiping away any burned bits. Add enough olive oil to coat the bottom of the pan along with the onion and garlic. Cook, stirring frequently, until onion is lightly browned, about 3 minutes.

Add the tomatoes, hot sauce, brown sugar and vinegar, then bring to a simmer. Cook briefly until slightly thickened, then stir in the bacon and add salt and pepper to taste. The relish can be made a day or two ahead and kept refrigerated.

TO MAKE THE GRITS: In a medium-size saucepan bring 4 cups water to a boil over medium-high heat, seasoned with a pinch of salt. Add the grits while stirring, and reduce heat to low. Cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and thick, about 20 minutes. Keep warm.

TO MAKE THE SHRIMP AND TO FINISH: Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Portion the hot grits into four large, oven-proof dinner bowls. Sprinkle the cheddar over the grits and heat in the oven until melted, about 3 to 5 minutes. (Alternatively, melt in the microwave for about 30 to 60 seconds per bowl.)

Meanwhile, add the oil to a hot saute pan over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and saute briefly until slightly brown. Add the shrimp, then season with salt, pepper and cayenne. Saute briefly until the edges of the shrimp start to turn pink.

Add the wine, deglaze the pan and cook until the wine is reduced by half. Add the relish and butter. Cook for another minute until the sauce is hot and slightly thickened and the shrimp are cooked through.

Divide the shrimp and sauce into the bowls and garnish with the green onions.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

NOT SO MELLOW YELLOW: White grits may rule in Buenviaje's native New Orleans, but at her San Francisco restaurants, the chef prefers to use yellow grits from Bob's Red Mill, which she believes are more flavorful and have a more toothsome texture.

MORE GRITS KNOW-HOW: When cooked in a nonstick pan, the classic Southern porridge will be less likely to burn and stick — making cleanup a breeze. If the grits do stick or scorch on the bottom, simply transfer them, using a rubber spatula so you don't scrape up any burnt pieces, to a clean pan and continue to cook. The longer the grits cook, the softer the texture becomes. They also suck up a ton of moisture, so if you're keeping the grits warm on the stove for any length of time or reheating them, you'll need to add more liquid.

San Franciscans craving a taste of New Orleans know that it doesn't get much better than Brenda's French Soul Food.

With her Polk Street flagship, along with offshoots Libby Jane Cafe and Brenda's Meat & Three, chef-owner Brenda Buenviaje has channeled her Creole New Orleans roots to create a mini-Southern food empire.

There's a good reason, when you drive by Buenviaje's Polk Street original, why you're likely to see a crowd patiently waiting outside for a table, especially during brunch hours. Along with drawing local fans, she's been known to play host to a celebrity or two. (Pulitzer Prize-winning rapper Kendrick Lamar is a fan.)

Brenda's plays the hits: savory crawfish-stuffed beignets, gumbo, po' boy sandwiches and red beans and rice. For Buenviaje's version of the classic shrimp and grits — which you'll find on the menu at both Brenda's French Soul Food and Brenda's Meat & Three on Divisadero — the chef dresses sauteed shrimp in a sweet and tangy tomato-bacon relish. It's a stroke of culinary genius as the relish serves as a bright counterpoint to the rich and creamy grits.

It's also quite possibly the best dish on the menu.

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