

CONGEE

I am generally not a rice person. I like to save room in my stomach for more interesting things. That said, one of my greatest pleasures is a steaming bowl of congee or rice porridge. I always make congee after a trip to Buford Highway because we always come home with copious amounts of the rice we didn't eat while there. It's crazy how much congee one cup of cooked rice yields. You can use water or stock for your congee. Naturally, stock will make a richer and more filling product. The toppings are what make this sing. Use what you like and as much as you like!

COOKING À LA Lala



CONGEE À LA LALA

1 cup cooked rice
6-8 cups water or stock
1 teaspoon salt

Put all ingredients into a 4-5 quart pot. Simmer over medium heat until all the liquid has been absorbed. Now, it gets fun....

Add-ins for your congee:

Scallions, thinly sliced
Cilantro, chopped
Chopped/shredded chicken
Ginger, fresh grated
Sriracha
Peanuts, chopped
Crispy fried onions (of green bean casserole fame)

This is just my list of favorites. Throw anything in there that you like!

CHICKEN STOCK

There are a million ways to do most everything in life: making your bed, opening a box of wine or preparing chicken stock. Here is the way I make mine. The only essential ingredient here is, of course, your bird. Because these days, you never know what the grocery might have, be flexible. If you can't get a whole chicken, look for thighs, wings or even backs. Hopefully, you can still get fresh vegetables and dried spices to round out your stock, but if not, forge ahead!

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CHICKEN STOCK À LA LALA

1 chicken, whole or cut up
1 onion, quartered
1 carrot, quartered

1 celery stalk, quartered
10-15 black peppercorns
2-3 bay leaves

If you have an electric pressure cooker (InstantPot) use the brown/saute setting and put your pieces or the whole bird in and brown until you get as much golden brown color as you can. If you are cooking on the stovetop, put your pieces in a 5-6 quart pot on medium high heat. When some fat has rendered and you have a nice sheen on the bottom of the pot, put your onion in cut sides down and brown until they have some nice color.

Throw in your carrot and celery pieces and dried spices and cover with water, 2 quarts should do it. If you're using an InstantPot, cook on high pressure for 25 minutes or so and let the pressure release naturally. If using the stove top, simmer on medium heat for at least an hour, but more if you have the time for a richer stock.

When finished cooking, remove the solids (the chicken and vegetables) then strain the broth into another container and chill overnight.

The fat/schmaltz will form a lovely solid layer on top. DON'T DISCARD! I like to put this in a smaller jar in the fridge to use instead of oil for browning, etc.

POLENTA

Polenta is one of my favorite comfort foods. It is easy to make, it's pretty quick and quite inexpensive. It is great on its own sprinkled with some fresh chives or other herbs and it is a great companion to grilled sausages, roast chicken and braised beef or pork. Polenta and I both love a nice gravy. You can make your polenta with water, stock, milk or cream, or any combination of these. You just need 4 cups of liquid to 1 cup of cornmeal. I like the Goya brand of Coarse Yellow Corn Meal; it's available at most grocery stores.

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POLENTA À LA LALA

- 1 cup coarse ground cornmeal
- 2 cups chicken stock (or water)
- 2 cups milk
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup (at least!) of grated cheese, parmesan, pecorino, etc.
- 1-2 tablespoons of butter (optional, but highly recommended!)

Put your 4 cups of liquid into a 2-3 quart pot and bring to a simmer. Slowly sprinkle in your cornmeal and stir, casually until it starts to thicken. This will take about 10 minutes. Before it gets to the point where it will cling to your spoon and not immediately fall back into the pot, add your cheese and stir until it has melted into the polenta. Taste it now. You may want more salt, you may want to add more cheese. Finish it with the butter if you know what's good for you. Serve it alone topped with herbs, or alongside a meat with a delicious gravy.