Contemporary Cornbread Making

Steps for Making Haudenosaunee Boiled Cornbread

This slideshow of 18 contemporary photographs by Mohawk photographer Laticia McNaughton illustrates the process of making a Haudenosaunee style of cornbread, also known in some communities as corn wheels. This bread bears little resemblance to the baked cornbread non-Native people may be familiar with. It is a round, boiled bread that is dense and moist, and which emits a distinct white-corn smell. There is no wheat flour nor leavener used in this recipe, only corn, water, and beans as ingredients plus the wood ash that is used for processing the corn. Other cooks will choose to add nuts, berries, maple syrup, and a variety of other bean types to their cornbread. This cornbread is considered a delicacy because of the many hours of preparation needed to create it.

In this photo gallery, you will watch Belinda Patterson make Gá:hgok or cornbread with the help of friends Marissa Manitowabi and Laticia McNaughton.

Laticia McNaughton
(Mohawk)

Marissa Manitowabi
(Seneca)

Belinda Patterson
(Tuscarora)
Haudenosaunee White Corn

Haudenosaunee White Corn is a type of corn that has been grown for hundreds of years by Native people from the six nations that make up the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and which they continue to grow today.

Haudenosaunee White Corn is known as a flour corn. Each kernel is filled with a powdery corn flour that is protected by a hard outer shell. Through a variety of processing techniques, from cooking in wood ash to pounding or grinding the kernels, this corn variety can be turned into a myriad of dishes, including corn soup, corn porridge, and cornbread, as shown in the slides that follow.

Photo by Tahila Mintz (Yaqui) / © AMNH
From Onëögë:n to Gá:hgok
Steps for Making Boiled Cornbread

STEP 1

Shelling Corn

After the Haudenosaunee White corn is dried, the kernels must first be shelled from the cobs. This is usually done by hand, by twisting and pushing the kernels until they loosen and fall from the cobs. There are machines that can shell corn for large-scale production.
STEP 2

Scooping Ashes

Ashes from burned hardwood logs are gathered from a fireplace or woodbox stove.

Photo by Marissa Manitowabi (Seneca) / © AMNH
Marissa sifts the ashes that she gathered from the fireplace to prepare them for cooking with the corn. The wood ash is naturally alkaline, like lye. When it is boiled with corn, it will eat through the outer hull of the corn, shortening the cooking time by more than half.
From Onöögë:n to Gá:hgok
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STEP 4
Pouring Corn Into Water

Marissa adds Haudenosaunee White Corn to a pot of boiling water. The corn has already been cleaned of any loose, dried bits of cob or corn silk.

Photo by Laticia McNaughton (Mohawk) / © AMNH
Marissa adds ashes to the same pot and stirs until they are blended in.
From Onëögë:n to Gá:hgok
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STEP 6
Orange Kernels

This image shows the corn after about 15 minutes, when the ashes are beginning their work of breaking down the hulls (outer shells). The kernels turn a bright orange color temporarily, before returning to an off-white shade.

Photo by Laticia McNaughton (Mohawk) / © AMNH
After 45 minutes of cooking, Marissa pours the ashes and corn into a corn-washing basket, ready to rinse them off. Rinsing was once done in a stream, but today it is most often done in a kitchen sink.
STEP 8

Rinsing Hulls and Ash Off the Corn

Marissa continues to rinse the corn until all the ash is removed. She is rubbing the corn against the weave of the basket, which helps to loosen the hulls.

Photo by Laticia McNaughton (Mohawk) / © AMNH
STEP 9

Corn Releasing Its Hulls

This is what the corn looks like after it has been washed. Its hulls (outer shells) are softened and its “eyes” are released. At this point, the corn is known as lyed, hulled, or cleaned corn.
STEP 10

Spreading Lyed Corn

The next step is to spread out the lyed corn someplace where it can dry out well. To dry the corn, Marissa is spreading it on a window screen and running a fan nearby. In the summer, some people will put it out under the sun. Others use dehydrators to speed the process along.
Laticia grinds the dried, hulled corn using a hand grinder, which turns the whole kernels into flour. This process can also be done with a corn pounder (a large mortar and pestle), a coffee mill, or a blender. All four are used today, depending on the occasion.
STEP 12

Pouring Boiling Water Over Corn Flour

Belinda pours boiling water into the ground corn flour. The natural starches in the corn that were released when it was cooked in wood ash, make it stick together so that she can start to form the corn into round loaves. An experienced bread maker can do this by eye, without measuring the water or flour.

Photo by Laticia McNaughton (Mohawk) / © AMNH
STEP 13

Mixing Corn Flour and Water

Belinda stirs the water and flour together, checking to see if the consistency is right. She can adjust this by adding more flour or water.
From Onëögë:n to Gá:hgok
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STEP 14
Adding Beans to Corn Flour

Belinda adds beans to the mixed corn flour and stirs to incorporate them. Here she uses kidney beans, but other Haudenosaunee varieties of beans are also used.

Photo by Laticia McNaughton (Mohawk) / © AMNH
STEP 15

Forming Corn Into Wheels

Belinda forms the corn into round “wheels,” compacting the corn as she goes, to make a solid disc.
STEP 16

Lowering Corn Wheel Into Water

Belinda lowers the cornbread into boiling water, where it will simmer for about 45 minutes. When the cornbread floats to the top, she will know it is done.
From Onēögē:n to Gá:hgok
Steps for Making Boiled Cornbread

STEP 17
Slicing Steaming Cornbread

Now that the cornbread is done, Belinda slices into it to enjoy a bite to eat.
BELINDA slices up the steaming cornbread sliced up for serving. This bread can be served with butter and maple syrup or made savory by serving with meat and gravy over it.