

*Porridges and Gruels,
Mainstays of the 18th Century Diet ©*

By: Victoria Rumble



Sir John Froissart was one of the first to extol the virtues of oats. In 1327 he stated that when the Scots invaded England they did so with no provisions other than, “a little bag of oatmeal”, tied behind their saddle. Ironically the English thought oats more suited to feeding horses than men.

Webster simply repeated Dr. Samuel Johnson’s 1775 definition of porridge in 1856 as “a kind of food made by boiling meat in water; broth” but added the note that, “This mixture is usually called in America *broth* or *soup* and not *porridge*. With us, *porridge* is a mixture of meal or flour boiled with water.”



Webster defined gruel as a kind of light food made by boiling meal in water (usually meal of oats or maize).

Scots have used oats to thicken soup, puddings, haggis, and to make oatcakes and bread, bannocks, brose, gruel, sowens, and porridge since before the settling of the American colonies.

Their porridge was thickened with peas, beans, or bread until the universal acceptance of oats as the country's staple grain.

Numerous books and documents refer to Scottish students at Universities surviving on a bag of oats taken from home, and usually cooked in their room. By mid-term so many students needed to return home to replenish their supply of the grain that a school holiday was set aside for the purpose called Mealy Monday.

Hugh Miller described nineteenth century itinerant stonemasons crowded into bothies [cottages or huts] in the evenings where they made oatcakes or porridge for their evening meal. For the bothy men, students, and average families oatmeal, whether made into oatcakes or porridge, constituted the greatest portion of their diet.

Sowens [or sowans] was made by steeping the husks of oats with attached starches in water for one to two days until they began to ferment after which the mass was skimmed and boiled. It was served with butter for Halloween. The dish was called *sucan* or *Llymru* in Wales, and *flummery* in England. – Webster, 1857.

The bran sifted out has a portion of dust among it, which makes it good feed for animals, and a palatable and nutritious food is extracted from it by soaking in water, and straining it through a cloth or fine sieve; the liquid thus obtained is then boiled and has the appearance and consistency of cooked corn starch, but is of a bluish color and pleasant sourish taste, and is called 'sowens'. – Craik.

Peas porridge and bean porridge were served in the U.S. by the early 1600's as described by John Winthrop in 1629.

The breakfast of the farmers often consisted mainly of a soup made of salt meat and beans, and seasoned with savory herbs. This dish was called 'bean porridge,' and has long been the fruitful subject of verse. – Hollister.

The oats were initially processed with stones, mortar and pestle style. A *quern* was a hand mill which milled the grain by crushing it with a cylindrical stone which was rolled along another slightly concave one. Querns came into being in Scotland about 80 AD, and were used by some through the early 20th century. The grain is poured down the center where it is crushed between the stones as the top stone is turned by means of a wooden handle.

The use of querns on American shores came with the scores of emigrants through the 18th and 19th centuries. The grain was winnowed by tossing it into the air. The heavier groats fell onto a cloth while the lighter skins were blown away. The groats [whole oat kernel after the husk was removed] were then re-ground. The classifications were pinhead, coarse, medium, and fine.

Later large mills were turned in Scotland, as they were in America, primarily by water. Other methods were by animal power or the wind.



Water-powered mill, located at Blair Athol, Perthshire, Scotland.

Porridge was made by adding the meal to boiling water, stirring, and simmering to the desired consistency. The cook time could be reduced to 20 or 30 minutes by soaking the oats in water overnight before beginning the cooking process.

Many Scottish women made large quantities of porridge which was poured into the drawer of a dresser in the kitchen and left to harden. During the week family members would slice pieces from the drawer and take it with them to the fields or to other work for their mid-day meal.

The Scots ate it with a little salt and butter, and sometimes with pepper. They thought the habit of some Americans of eating it with sugar or molasses was over-indulgent.

The practice of using salt instead of sugar was well established in the U.S. as well as demonstrated in various letters and book entries such as that of Edward Shippen, Nov. 1776, at Lancaster, PA. "I received a few shillings as Recorder of Deeds and Deputy Register, but scarcely enough to buy salt for my porridge".

The English *Model Cookery and Housekeeping Book* instructed serving the porridge with hot milk and salt or sugar, Miss Beeton included neither, and instructions published by the *People's Friend* are very little different from either though neither of the first two were well received by the Scots. They instructed adding the salt only in the last 10 minutes of cooking so that it did not hinder the oats from plumping properly, and they suggested by adding milk one had a dish fit to set before a king. These thoughts were repeated in American books.

The sources all seem to agree with vigorous stirring to prevent lumping and that stirring should be done with a wooden spoon or stick (called often a spurtle or theevil) in a sun-wise, or clockwise, direction. Some went so far as to designate the grain be dropped in with one hand while stirring with the other.



It was served so often that Harriet Beecher Stowe called porridge [or parritch], “the great staple dish throughout Scotland” in 1854.

In 1851 Miss Leslie instructed gruel be made by stirring the “grits” into water before pouring the mixture into boiling water. Four tablespoons of the coarsely ground oatmeal was used with a pint of water. She suggested serving it with butter, wine, nutmeg, “or whatever is thought proper”.

She gave a receipt for panada which was made from bread, sago, and tapioca, but no receipt for porridge. Her method of making gruel varied little from those previously given for porridge despite the difference in recipe title, a fact probably explained by her Scottish ancestry and having lived in England despite being born in Philadelphia.

A Scot who came over in 1822 was still dependent on two meals of oatmeal porridge and milk per day and oatcakes 29 years later, not surprising since one of Scotland’s favorite sons, Sir Walter Scott, stated he and others breakfasted on simple milk porridge until the age of 15.

In the 1860’s American writers said oats were the cheapest grain on the market, but gave, “the greatest amount of power of any grain consumed by man or beast”. Those accounts exemplified the Highlander for his strength and endurance.

Look at the Scotch with their oatmeal porridge, as robust a set of men as ever lived. A Highlander will scale mountains all day upon a diet of oatmeal stirred in water fresh from a gurgling spring with his finger, in a leather cup. – Robinson.

Oats were made into flat cakes baked on a girdle [flat griddle] in Scotland, and were recognized as a healthy alternative to bread in the U.S. “Oatmeal makes as good cakes as buckwheat, and far more nutritious”. – Morris.

Oatcakes were made in two thicknesses, one about a quarter of an inch, the other less. The thinner cakes were dried by the fire after being made so as to preserve them for use.

Barley was used to make porridge in Scotland and imported into the U.S. where it was used primarily in soups. In the U.S. cracked wheat and corn were commonly used in porridge.

The corn porridge was called grits, hominy, or samp, depending on location. It was one of those foods that kept for long periods of time without spoiling. “...they make it in a very large pot or kettle; and we have heard of people having enough cooked for a week”. – Furman.

Indian pudding is simply an upscale version of cornmeal porridge, and was a New England staple. Boiling milk with butter and molasses was poured over meal and allowed to steep for an hour. When cooled it was mixed with eggs, spices, and perhaps lemon zest and either baked or steamed in a pudding cloth. A sauce usually accompanied it. This might have been eaten for breakfast, but more often appeared on the table later in the day.



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