

Why Our Summer Corn Is Ever Sweeter

New breeds have transformed corn's traditional flavor and texture, making it more sugary and less creamy



Photo: H. Armstrong Roberts/Getty Images

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Few summer treats feel quite as timeless as a whole, sweet corn on the cob. It seems to belong to an older, simpler way of eating, in which no cutlery is required (unless you insist on using those tiny cute corn holders). You slowly rotate the cob in your hands and use your teeth to extract every sweet yellow morsel. Maize eating in Mexico goes back more than 7,000 years. In America, the first English settlers began using field corn to make flour, but records suggest that they didn't start eating sweet corn until 1779, when colonial soldiers on campaign discovered it and brought it home to their farms.

It is an illusion, however, to imagine that corn on the cob is something eternal and unchanging. Farmers market corn may look remarkably similar to the corn of the Aztecs (minus the amazing range of colors), but more than 90% of the fresh corn for sale in the U.S. now consists of modern hybrids that are far sweeter than corn ever used to be. In 1950, Dr. J.R. Laugham at the University of Illinois discovered a distinct and very sweet strain of corn with a gene known as “shrunk two” because the kernels shriveled up when they dried. Laugham's discovery transformed the sweet corn industry, making way for new varieties of corn that were “supersweet,” “ultrasweet” and “extrasweet.” Anyone born later than the 1980s may not even remember the taste of old corn, which could be gloriously milky in texture but deeply unreliable in its sweetness.

Like many delicious things, the sweetness of sweet corn (sometimes aptly known as “sugar corn”) was originally an accident. With most forms of field maize—the kind of corn that is

grown for polenta and corn flour—the kernels gradually transform from sugar to starch. Sweet corn is different. A mutant gene prevents the sugars from transforming into starch, a flaw that results in those sweet juicy kernels.

When just picked, sweet corn has at least twice the sugar content of field corn. Fresh corn can be so sweet that, as the food writer John Thorne has written, the best of all ways to eat it is scraped raw into a bowl as a “sweet, milky pulp.” Mr. Thorne recommends eating it just as it is, with a spoon, “sitting on the porch in meditative silence.” In his 2000 book, “Pot on the Fire,” he remarks that he never tasted anything “so effortlessly good” as this raw corn pulp, to which he adds neither salt nor sugar. But a dish as unadorned as this can only be only as good as the corn itself.



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The great problem with older sweet corn varieties is how fast the sugar would turn to starch after harvest, losing as much as half of its sugar content in the first 24 hours. People used to joke that to achieve peak sweetness, the pan for boiling corn should be put on the stove before you even harvested the cobs. As a child, I remember eating corn on the cob that was sometimes ambrosial in its deliciousness and sometimes as dull as chomping on a loofah. By contrast, the supersweet varieties of corn that now dominate the market have been bred to stay sweet for a week or more—a remarkable development. The downside is that they lack the rich, corny taste and creamy texture of the old corn, but most consumers don’t mind this apparently. Fresh corn consumption is on the rise around the world, notably in China, where yellow corn juice is a drink loved by children.

The transformation of modern corn poses dilemmas for the cook. When an ingredient is so different from the way it was before, recipes need to adapt. Take corn chowder. Many older recipes recommend adding a spoonful or two of sugar to sweeten it. With the new varieties of corn, this would be sheer craziness. You want to undercut the sweetness of the corn, not amp it up. My current favorite corn soup is the corn and cauliflower chowder in “One Pot, Pan, Planet” by Anna Jones. The bitterness of the cauliflower is just right against the sweetness of the corn. At the end, you add some sauteed green chile, scallions, basil, lemon juice and roasted peanuts,

all of which tone down the sweetness even more. By the same token, Mexican *elote*-style seasoning for corn—consisting of cheese, cilantro, lime juice, spices, green onion and mayo—is a great way to balance out the sweetness.

Texture is another way in which corn has changed. Heirloom varieties of sweet corn contain something called phytyoglycogen, which is what makes the kernels creamy. Most modern hybrids lack this, so if you are making something such as a corn fritter or a corn pudding, you might need a little flour or polenta to help it stick together. A recipe for Southern Corn Pudding from 1917, from “The Book of Corn Cookery” by Mary L. Wade, contained not a speck of flour, but I find that with modern corn, it sets better in the oven if you add a few spoonfuls of cornmeal or something similar.

When it comes to a whole corn on the cob, you can just revel in the sweetness of the new varieties and appreciate the fact that they cook more quickly than heritage corn. I would feel sad if I didn’t eat plain buttered corn several times before the summer is over. Alice Waters advises in “Chez Panisse Vegetables” that corn should be shucked “at the last minute.” If you favor boiling, it takes only a couple of minutes to cook in rapidly boiling water. Equally delicious is a whole cob of grilled corn. Simply peel open the husks, remove the stringy silk and roll the husks back over the cobs so that they form their own protective casing before grilling them for 8-10 minutes, depending on how hot your fire is.

Whether the corn is boiled or grilled, butter is never a mistake, but you already knew that. As the English food writer Edward Bunyard wrote in 1937, “Butter it must have, plenty of it, to bathe the yellow grains and dribble down one’s chin, as one chews away.” Some things never change.

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