

# Corn Chowder

Thick, chunky chowder has always been a humble food made with whatever is around. In its early years in North America, that meant seafood, such as cod or haddock, added to a base of salt pork and onions. By the mid-19th century, the homey soup had moved steadily inland, where cooks eliminated the fish and added ingredients straight from the farm: milk, cream, potatoes, and butter. It was probably only a matter of time before another ordinary ingredient, an American original, found its way into the chowder pot: corn. In short order, creamy corn chowder, born in New England, was a classic from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters. BY MARÍA DEL MAR SACASA



Poring over corn chowder recipes, I saw that the list of ingredients had made its way through history almost unchanged: corn, salt pork or bacon, chopped onions, broth, cubed potatoes, and milk or cream. The cooking method—which I followed myself—hadn't changed either: Chopped onions are (and were) sautéed in salt pork or bacon fat. Everything else is (and was) added and simmers together until the vegetables are tender. So I was surprised when five recipes I tried (including one of the first ever to appear in print, from *Mrs. Lincoln's Boston Cook Book* of 1884) produced noticeably different chowders. Not one delivered everything we sought in ours, namely: velvety texture; unambiguous corn flavor; plentiful, plump kernels; and, since it was summer, delicacy.

I combined the best features from the two recipes we liked most and was about to start my testing when I happened to find a *Good Housekeeping* recipe from

1888 that used a dozen ears of corn (most recipes called for three to six ears). Aha! Use more corn, get more corn flavor. Hopeful, I made the recipe, scraping 12 ears into my soup. The chowder was packed with kernels. Unfortunately, it lacked the silken, full-flavored base I sought.

To start building that base, I returned to my combined working recipe and tested salt pork versus bacon. Tasters preferred the sweet smokiness of the bacon. Next, to add depth, I sautéed the fresh kernels (with the chopped onions) in the bacon fat. Test kitchen experience taught me the technique should add toasty, slightly caramelized flavors to the corn, and by extension the chowder, and it did. As long as I had tasters at the table, I had them taste chowders made with different types of potatoes. They preferred red potatoes, which retained their shape in the chowder and added a pretty gleam of pink.

To thicken the chowder, I tried the standard roux, a paste of cooked flour and butter. It was a little heavy for summer, but it worked, as did cornstarch. I thickened a third pot of chowder with pureed potatoes. That was also acceptable, though my chowder was veering into potato soup territory. I couldn't resist trying Common Crackers, called for in several old recipes. These dense New England crackers resemble the hardtack sailors ate on long ocean voyages and probably used to thicken fish chowder. I crushed saltines, the closest match I could find. My curiosity was satisfied, if not my palate: The broth had the texture of soggy paper napkins.

Amid all these possibilities, I couldn't let go of an idea I had to use the corn to both thicken the chowder and intensify its flavor. I blended a few cups of fresh kernels with some chicken broth (the base of my soup). Even when I let the blender run for almost

## TEST KITCHEN TECHNIQUE

### Clean Shave

Cutting kernels from corn can be an awkward task. Here's how to steady the cob and keep the kernels from flying around the kitchen, all while maneuvering a sharp knife.



Cut the cob in half crosswise, then stand it on its flat, cut end. Using a chef's knife, cut the kernels off the ear, one side at a time.

10 minutes, the tough outer hulls never completely broke down. I tried the same thing with cooked kernels and broth, stirring them back into the chowder. Better—the soup was thick and robustly flavored, but it was still far from silky.

I drew up a list of ingredients that might thicken my chowder and ticked them off one by one. Frozen corn pureed with chicken broth was as raggedy as fresh. Cornmeal and polenta were grainy. Corn muffin mix produced chowder with a nasty, artificial after-taste. Hominy (dried corn kernels that have been soaked in lye to remove the hulls) yielded the smoothest puree of all and an excellent soup to boot, but its distinctive savory flavor was all wrong for sweet, creamy chowder.

I'd saved canned corn for last. Truthfully, I wasn't all that keen on using it, certain it would taste tinny. A Fannie Merritt Farmer recipe from 1896 made me reconsider. Though the process of canning was far from new at the turn of the century, canned foods still had a certain cachet; also, fresh corn was unavailable for most of the year. I pureed some chicken broth with two 15-ounce cans and was delighted to discover that the corn broke down beautifully, yielding a golden, satiny chowder base with a vibrant, fresh corn taste. The cream I was using (some recipes use milk) underlined its velvety texture.

Reading through my file of recipes one last time, I was reminded that *Mrs. Lincoln's Boston Cook Book* based its version on a corn stock made with the shucked cobs. I streamlined that, simply tossing the cobs into my simmering chowder and then fishing them out before I served it. It was a subtle but significant difference that pushed my chowder from excellent to exceptional.

## CORN CHOWDER Serves 6 to 8

Be sure to save the cobs for the chowder.

- 6 ears corn
- 2 (15-ounce) cans whole kernel corn, drained
- 5 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 3 slices bacon, chopped fine
- 1 onion, chopped
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound red potatoes, scrubbed and cut into ½-inch dice
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 4 scallions, sliced thin

**1. PREP CORN** Following photo at left, cut kernels from ears of corn; reserve kernels and cobs separately. Puree canned corn and 2 cups broth in blender until smooth.

**2. SAUTÉ VEGETABLES** Cook bacon in Dutch oven over medium heat until crisp, about 8 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer bacon to paper towel-lined plate and reserve. Cook onion, corn kernels, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper in bacon fat until vegetables are softened and golden brown, 6 to 8 minutes.

**3. FINISH SOUP** Add potatoes, corn puree, remaining broth, and reserved corn cobs to Dutch oven and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until potatoes are tender, about 15 minutes. Discard cobs and stir in cream, scallions, and reserved bacon. Season with salt

and pepper. Serve. (Soup can be refrigerated in airtight container for 3 days.)

## NEW ORLEANS-STYLE CORN CHOWDER

Prepare Corn Chowder, replacing bacon with 4 ounces finely chopped andouille sausage and adding 1 celery rib, chopped fine, and 1 red bell pepper, seeded and chopped fine, along with onion in step 2.

## CORN CHOWDER WITH CHORIZO AND CHILES

Prepare Corn Chowder, replacing bacon with 4 ounces finely chopped chorizo sausage and replacing scallions with ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro. In step 2, add 1–2 jalapeño chiles, seeded and minced, and ½ teaspoon ground cumin along with onion.

## CORN CHOWDER WITH SWEET POTATOES AND CAYENNE

Prepare Corn Chowder, replacing red potatoes with 1 pound sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch pieces. In step 3, stir in 1 tablespoon maple syrup and ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper along with cream.

## CORN CHOWDER WITH PROSCIUTTO AND SAGE

Prepare Corn Chowder, replacing bacon with 4 ounces finely chopped deli prosciutto and replacing scallions with 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh sage.

## TEST KITCHEN DISCOVERY

### The Right Corn for the Job

Corn chowder is usually thickened with a paste of flour and butter, but we hoped the corn itself might do double duty as thickener and flavor booster. We tested every corn product we could think of, including kernels in all forms (except popcorn). The answer took us by surprise.



**PUREED FRESH CORN**  
Forget about fresh. No matter how long it's pureed, it's shaggy and makes the broth look curdled.



**PUREED FROZEN CORN**  
Frozen corn gets us a step closer, but our puree is still not silky smooth.



**PUREED CANNED CORN**  
And the winner is...canned corn! At last, lush, silken chowder.

## RATING CANNED CORN

We usually substitute frozen corn for fresh, but when you plan to puree corn into velvety smoothness (as in our Corn Chowder), canned corn is a better choice because the softer kernels break down more readily. We chose five nationally available brands, tasting them plain and in chowder. Manufacturers add water, salt, and sometimes sugar to canned corn, but our top two brands had no added sugar—the sweetness came from the corn itself. BY PEGGY CHUNG COLLIER

### RECOMMENDED

**LIBBY'S** Organic Whole Kernel Sweet Corn  
Price: \$1.99 for 15.25 ounces  
Sugar per ½-Cup Serving: 7 grams  
Ingredients: Organic corn, water, sea salt



### TASTERS' NOTES

**Comments:** "Crisp and sweet!" with a "firm and crunchy texture" when tasted plain, this corn earned top marks for its "bold corn flavor" and "silky smooth" texture in the chowder.

**DEL MONTE** Fresh Cut Golden Sweet Whole Kernel Corn  
Price: \$1.39 for 15.25 ounces  
Sugar per ½-Cup Serving: 7 grams  
Ingredients: Corn, water, salt



**Comments:** In close second place, these kernels were "crunchy," "sweet," and "fresh tasting" when sampled plain. The chowder made with them was "smooth," "rich," and "earthy."

### NOT RECOMMENDED

**DEL MONTE** Organic Whole Kernel Corn  
Price: \$2.22 for 15.25 ounces  
Sugar per ½-Cup Serving: 7 grams  
Ingredients: Organic corn, water, sea salt



### TASTERS' NOTES

**Comments:** "Tastes like a vitamin," one taster complained. Others detected a "finny" flavor and a "leathery" texture that was also "like plastic." This brand was naturally sweet, but tasters couldn't get past its off-flavors.

**GOYA** Whole Kernel Golden Corn  
Price: \$.79 for 15.25 ounces  
Sugar per ½-Cup Serving: 5 grams  
Ingredients: Corn, water, sugar, salt



**Comments:** These "mushy" kernels were "bland," "boring," and "lacked any sweetness." Added sugar failed to mimic the natural sweetness of corn or make up for a texture that was "tough as fires."

**GREEN GIANT** Whole Kernel Sweet Corn  
Price: \$1.25 for 15.25 ounces  
Sugar per ½-Cup Serving: 6 grams  
Ingredients: Corn, water, sugar, salt



**Comments:** "Mushy and soggy," this corn tasted "bland" and "tired." Even the added sugar didn't boost its "dull" flavor or hide its "rubbery" texture.