



MEDIA RELEASE

TENNESSEE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
MARKET DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

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OKRA, GRITS, GOAT CHEESE MAKE SATISFYING SOUTHERN TRIO

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - "If apple pie and hotdogs are the foods that say 'America,' what are the foods that say 'Southern?'"

"You know the answer," says Tammy Algood, spokesperson for the statewide Pick Tennessee Products campaign. "Okra and grits."

"Okra is so essential to some Southern dishes that, if only okra is left out, the remaining ingredients no longer qualify as that dish. We're talking about recipes for gumbo, here; the very word for okra, in the West African countries we got this vegetable from, is 'gambo'."

Pick Tennessee Products is a promotion developed by the Tennessee Department of Agriculture to help consumers identify and choose foods grown or processed in Tennessee. Food expert Tammy Algood creates recipes featuring Tennessee farm and processed products, available at www.picktnproducts.org. Her latest recipe is Goat Cheese Grits with Okra. Okra is available now on farms and at farmers markets across the state.

Okra is a member of the Mallow family, related to cotton, hibiscus and hollyhock, cultivated for its edible green seed pod. It is actually a tall – about six feet-- annual tropical herb. A seed pod is three to 10 inches long, tapering, usually with ribs down its length. Tender, unripe seed pods are used as a vegetable, and have a unique texture and bold flavor.

Okra is a good source of vitamin C and A, as well as B complex vitamins, iron and calcium. It is low in calories, a good source of dietary fiber, and is fat-free. Increased interest in American regional foods has brought okra renewed attention and new serving methods.

"If you go to your local farmers market or farm for your okra, you'll find the picked pods sitting loose in baskets," says Algood. "That way, the choice is yours – just scoop up the perfect size, quality and quantity you're looking for."

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“Choose young, tender but firm pods, generally no bigger than the length of your palm. They should be a rich, green color. Avoid pods that are dull and dry looking, blemished or limp. Mature okra is used to make rope and paper, so avoid old, woody pods!”

Store okra in a paper bag in the warmest part of refrigerator, as temperatures below 45 degrees can damage okra. It does not store well, so use within two or three days at most.

“Do not wash okra until you’re ready to use it,” says Algood, “or it will become slimy. When preparing it, remember that the more times it’s cut, the slimier it will seem.”

“As for grits,” says Algood, “the word ‘grits’ can refer to any coarsely ground grain, but it is commonly used to mean hominy grits. It’s all just corn, and grits are simply not ground as fine a corn meal. Hominy is the dried kernel of corn after the outside hull and germ have been removed through a long soaking process in an alkaline solution.

“Hominy is a native American food dating back at least 5,000 years, and was one of the first foods the Indians gave to the European colonists,” says Algood. “It’s the very same product as polenta. Since Italy only got corn meal for their polenta by way of Native Americans, grits has at least a 4,500-year head start on polenta!”

“It’s a lot of fun to go to a farmers market and bring home ingredients you know are local and go together well,” says Algood. “With this recipe, you have a chance of finding not just the okra, but the grits, too – and even the goat cheese – when you go. If your local farmers market doesn’t carry the grits or goat cheese, it’s still easy – just visit the Pick Tennessee Products online store, and you can order Old Mill grits and Bonnie Blue Farms goat cheese from their Web sites.”

For a list of Tennessee farmers markets, farms, or for more recipes featuring Tennessee farm products, visit www.picktnproducts.org.

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Goat Cheese Grits with Okra

4 cups water, divided
6-8 fresh okra pods
1 cup uncooked quick-cooking Old Mill grits
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon white pepper
2 eggs, beaten
¼ cup butter, cut into pieces
4 ounces Bonnie Blue Farms goat cheese, crumbled

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease an 11x7-inch baking dish and set aside. Bring 2 cups of water to a boil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add okra and cook 10 minutes. Remove with a slotted spoon, reserving cooking liquid. Allow okra to cool, then coarsely chop.

Add remaining 2 cups of water to reserved liquid. Bring to a boil. Gradually stir in grits, salt and pepper. Return to a boil, cover, reduce heat and simmer 5-7 minutes. Gradually whisk about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of grits into eggs. Add to remaining grits and whisk in butter. Stir in okra and cheese. Spoon into prepared baking dish and bake 55-60 minutes or until set. Yield: 8 servings.