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Lend Me Your Ears

By Katy Budge

Ubiquitous Corn ... That Pesky High Fructose Corn Syrup ... Related Kernels & Factoids ... and just how do I manage to sneak in a homemade corned beef recipe into this?



Well, I had great hopes of offering you a delicious citrus article for February and maybe even an avocado essay for March, but our recent weather pattern managed to put those ideas in the deep freeze for a while, so I'm taking the opportunity to write about corn.

Of course, normally this would be a topic for the summer months when freshly husked corn is a feature of every backyard barbecue, but corn isn't just about summer anymore. It's EVERYWHERE, and I'm not even talking about corn in fairly recognizable forms such as corn flakes, corn tortillas, or corn chips, or popcorn.

I'm talking about the virtual house of cards we've built into our food industry. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan does a far better and more complete job of explaining the historic whys and whens of this development, but suffice it to say we have become a nation of corn. In one form or another, corn feeds our animals, sweetens our food, makes products easier to work with, provides vegetable shortening x the list goes on and on, but Pollan sums it up perfectly with this example: when you consume a meal of commercially processed, fried, breaded chicken strips and soda, you're essentially having corn with your corn.

Perhaps the most insidious presence of corn comes in the form of corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup to be exact, or HFCS as it's known in the industry (which should not be confused with the naturally occurring fructose found in many fruits). I challenge you to take a little tour of your pantry and have a look at the labels of such "non-corn" related items as barbecue sauce, bread, sports drinks, baking mixes, chewing gum, sodas, and even that low-fat flavored yoghurt. You might be very surprised at what you find; chances are that corn syrup will be in the vast majority of those foods, especially among the more processed products and those requiring a long shelf life.

Corn has an ancient history in the Americas, and has been a basic subsistence crop for humans for countless generations. However, its historical incarnation has been as a grain, not as a syrup, so what happened? Part of the answer has to do with corn's historical cheap prices, which forced it into the agricultural sector (again, I would suggest Pollan's *Omnivore's Dilemma* for a history of this); part of the answer has to do with the human craving for sweetness.

Historians have argued that Christopher Columbus's greatest gift to the Old World from the New was not knowledge or riches but sugarcane. A fully cooked discussion of sugar, sugarcane, and sugar beets is for another time, but suffice it to say that sugar was a hot commodity – relegated only to royalty in some cultures, rationed because of war in other times.

Until the mid-20th century, sweetness in foods came almost exclusively from sugar-related products such as sugarcane and sugar beets. In the 1970s, the food world began to realize a paradigm shift as the process for making HFCS from corn was developed by Japanese researchers. The syrup began to rapidly displace sugar/sucrose as the preferred sweetener in food products, and by the mid 1980s, the food industry began a full-blown love affair with HFCS that is today about a \$2.6 billion business.

Indeed, what's not to love? Corn syrup does require more processing, but ultimately ends up being far cheaper than sugar to produce, transport, and introduce into food. It helps prevent freezer burn, helps baked goods brown, helps products stay soft, helps extend shelf life, and helps add a subtle (or not so subtle) dose of sweetness to an ever increasing array of offerings.

Well, there's a raging debate over what's not to love about HFCS. Some researchers suggest that our bodies metabolize fructose – even the naturally occurring kind which is typically half sucrose – differently than other sugars, causing strains on our livers and leading to a host of related overall health problems; HFCS is 100% fructose, so the effect is then arguably multiplied. ([link to more info](#))

One factor, however, that most can agree on is that we are consuming vast amounts of HFCS without even knowing it. A formerly innocent and necessary staple, corn has become a prime culprit in the bulging epidemic of obesity.

Another issue with HFCS is that there's a good chance that much of the corn used to produce it is genetically modified, and arguably the HFCS molecules themselves have been so tricked up that they barely resemble a natural product anymore either. With HFCS such as vast part of our food system, how much genetically modified corn is really out there and how much are we really consuming? ([link to more info](#))

So, in wrapping up this rant, let's go back to the house of cards analogy. In the past 30-40 years, our industrial food system has essentially bet the farm -- pun intended -- on corn. We have come to demand a lot from this one commodity: food and cooking oil for humans, food for livestock (replacing their traditional grass-fed diets, by the way), HFCS for almost every processed food product there is. So now, what happens when corn prices begin fluctuating – from a record \$5.55/bushel in 1996, to \$1.95/bushel in 2004, to \$3.23 in 2007? I'm certainly all for farmers getting a fair price (which they aren't, and rising prices may even put some livestock producers out of business) ([link to more info](#)), but arguably, the price of corn affects this nation and the world as much or more than the price of gas.

Oh, and speaking of gas ... what happens when we add ethanol demands to this house of corn? ([Read more about that here from Associated Press, Bloomberg, and the Des Moines Register.](#))

Related Kernels...

If you ever have this conversation with your butcher ... RUN!

Accordingly to a post on [Gristmill](#), the conversation went something like this:

Me: Hi, do you have any grass-fed beef?

Butcher: Hmm, grass-fed? I don't think you can feed grass to cows.

Me: Well, they're ruminant animals, so I think that's what they're supposed to eat.

Butcher: [sympathetic-but-authoritative head shake] I don't think so. They need vitamins and minerals and stuff.

Me: Uh ...

Butcher: Now this [points down at large, marbled slab in meat case], this is corn-fed beef.

Me: Yeah, well, um, thanks anyway.

One acre of corn provides the feed to produce 896 pounds of corn-fed beef, 2,240 pounds of pork or 2,987 pounds of chicken x or about 448 gallons of ethanol.

Corn is America's number one food crop, with production levels of twice any other crop, and half of it goes to feed livestock.

In Mexico, the price for corn tortillas – a subsistence food for the majority of the country – has recently risen as much as 50%. ([link to more info](#))

In 1980, we consumed less than 3 million short tons of HFCS; by 1995, that number had risen to 8 million, and today Americans consume more HFCS than actual sugar.

Most of the soft drinks in Mexico are sweetened with real sugar or cane syrup – the reason why Cokes down there taste like the ones you had as a kid. However, in December 2006, Mexico was pressured by the WTO to lift its 20% tax on HFCS drinks, so will south-of-the-border soda manufacturers go the way of their northern counterparts?

And Kernels of Truth about Corned Beef ...

Though this dish is thought of as traditionally Irish, it probably only occasionally graced the plates of Irish kings, certainly not the vast majority of the people, who usually had to make do with cheaper and smaller cuts of meat.

The name "corned beef" refers to the method of curing, which dates back to Anglo-Saxon times. The meat was dry-cured with "corns" of salt, some even the size of a corn kernel.

Homemade Corned Beef

The meat needs about three weeks to cure, so plan ahead. I made this last year with a beautiful brisket-type cut (various cuts will work) from Debbie Paver's *Charter Oak Meats*; this year I'm trying a grass-fed brisket from Old Creek Ranch. The corned beef had great flavor without that chemically imparted pink flavor (though if you're sold on that feature, feel free to toss in a bit of saltpeter, aka sodium nitrate). I like to kick up the spices on my recipes, so if you like less, just cut back on the garlic and peppercorns, or add more variations such as paprika or even hot peppers. (*Pickling spice ingredients -- usually whole or in coarse pieces -- can include allspice, bay leaves, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, ginger, mustard seeds and peppercorns. Blends are easily available, but if you want to make your own, all the ingredients are available at [The Secret Garden](#) in San Luis Obispo.)

1 beef brisket, approximately 3-4 pounds

2 quarts hot water

1 cup kosher salt

1 Tablespoon sugar

2 bay leaves

2-3 teaspoons black peppercorns

2 peeled garlic cloves, mashed

1 Tablespoon pickling spice*

1-2 Tablespoons white or apple cider vinegar (optional)

Trim beef of extra fat, then wash and dry, and rub with 3 to 4 tablespoons salt.

Dissolve remainder of salt in hot water.

Stir in spices and vinegar.

Place beef in enameled or glass pot or stone crock (be SURE not to use a reactive metal one) and pour the salted water over it.

Weigh down meat with plate or other heavy object so that the meat is completely covered by the brine.

Cover pot and refrigerate for about three weeks, turning the meat once or twice a week.

When ready to cook, discard marinade, wash meat well to remove the brine and prepare according to your favorite corned beef recipe.

For wine pairing -- once again, Pinot to the rescue! A classic Pinot Noir will have enough tannins to stand up to the corned beef and enough fruit and other flavor profiles to complement the cabbage.