

Oatmeal Can Make For Delicious Breakfast



BOB CHAMBERLIN/ LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT
This granola mix would make a terrific gift, packaged in a storage jar.

BY RUSS PARSONS

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Now that Thanksgiving is out of the way, maybe we can talk about something that is really important: oatmeal.

Let's be specific. What most Americans think of as "oatmeal" is really rolled oats. You know, the stuff that comes in the big cardboard tube with the smiling Quaker on the front. These are oat groats (the grain with the husk removed) that have been steamed to soften them and then rolled flat. This process lets you cook them more quickly at home. The difference between rolled oats that are labeled "old-fashioned" and "quick-cooking" is how thickly they're rolled.

Real oatmeal is made from raw oat groats that are chopped to a fairly uniform size. It takes longer to cook and has a firmer texture than rolled oats.

I use rolled oats for making cookies and things like that, but you can't match the real stuff for cereal. And because there is no kitchen project too minor for a kitchen geek to overthink, I have made something of a small science out of cooking my morning oatmeal. It's not hard, but I'm convinced that it makes a difference in flavor.

I use the McCann's Irish Oatmeal that comes in those cool tins. Use a dry saucepan, 1 quart is fine for two or three people. Cook the oatmeal over medium heat until it smells nice and toasty. That'll take about 3 or 4 minutes, depending on the heat. You'll hear it start to pop when it's ready.

When your cereal begins to sing, add four times the volume of oats in water (1/3 cup of oats, enough for two people, will take 1 1/3 cups water). Increase the heat to high until the water starts to boil, give the pot a good stir, then turn the flame to low to maintain a decent simmer.

Partially cover the pan with a lid, but be sure to prop it askew with a wooden spoon or a whisk. This is important: If the lid is on too tight, the oatmeal will boil over, and there is no cleanup project worse than scraping baked-on oatmeal off of stove-top burners.

Let the oatmeal simmer for a good 20 minutes or so. You don't need to pay much attention, but if you're going to walk the dog, put a flame-tamer underneath the pan to keep it from scorching. When the oatmeal is done, there will probably be some liquid on top, and there may be a thin layer of dried flour-skin. This will disappear when you stir it. The oatmeal itself will be tender but still have a bit of "pop."

Whisk in butter according to your conscience, toss in a small handful of dried fruit (I use a mix of raisins, sour cherries and cranberries), cover tightly and let stand off heat for five minutes for the fruit to soften.

You can doctor this base however you want. I like a mix of brown and white sugar (brown for molasses, white for sweetness) or maybe some maple syrup. Then some chopped toasted nuts — almonds or walnuts. Finally, I add just enough milk to make the mixture creamy. If I have leftover steamed milk from the morning coffee, I might use that. And if I'm feeling splurge-y, nothing but half-and-half; that's just how I roll.

Those quicker-cooking rolled oats are great for granola. And when I'm not eating real oatmeal (foolish consistency, etc.), my breakfast is usually fruit, yogurt and granola from Christine Moore's excellent recipe in her new "Little Flower" cookbook. I say "based on" because, after following Moore's script exactly the first time, I've thrown in a few little changes, honoring the recipe in structure if not in detail.

In the last month I've made

this recipe at least once a week (depending on how quickly we go through it). And I don't think I've ever made it exactly the same way twice. I change the mix of the nuts and dried fruit depending on what appeals to me at the moment (and depending on what I have left from other cooking — this is a great way to clean out all those odds and ends of nuts you probably have in your freezer).

Start with a bunch of fruit (lately I've been using persimmons from our tree, spiked with a bit of lime juice), then add a

handful of granola and top with a good dollop of yogurt sweetened with honey.

This granola mix would make a terrific gift too, packaged in Ikea storage jars. Be sure to include the recipe, because folks will definitely want to fix it again.

And, after all, there are more holidays just around the corner.

GRANOLA

Total time: 50 minutes, plus cooling time
Servings: Makes 16 cups
Note: Adapted from Christine

Moore's "Little Flower: Recipes From the Cafe."

- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup light brown sugar
- 1/2 cup maple syrup
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- 4 cups old-fashioned rolled oats
- 3 cups mixed chopped nuts (almonds, pecans, walnuts, pistachios, hazelnuts and pumpkin seeds)
- 4 cups mixed chopped dried fruit (sour cherries, cranberries, apples, pears, apricots, raisins, dates)

1. Heat the oven to 325 degrees. Line two jellyroll pans with silicone mats or parchment.
2. In a saucepan over medium-low heat, heat the oil, sugar, syrup and salt until clear, stirring occasionally. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla extract.
3. Place the rolled oats and the mixed nuts in a large mixing bowl and pour the sugar mixture over. Stir with a spatula to coat the oats and nuts evenly. Divide the mixture between the lined jellyroll pans, patting with the back of a spatula to make thin, even layers.

4. Bake until golden brown, about 30 minutes, rotating the sheets and stirring halfway through.
 5. Cool slightly before stirring in the dried fruit and storing. The mixture will keep in a tightly covered container at room temperature for at least a week.
- Each 1/2 cup serving: 238 calories; 4 grams protein; 31 grams carbohydrates; 3 grams fiber; 12 grams fat; 2 grams saturated fat; 0 cholesterol; 18 grams sugar; 67 mg sodium.

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