Southern (Cassie’s) Cornbread

Corn was a gift from the Native peoples of Mexico to the rest of the world. In a classic story from the Zapotec people near Oaxaca, ants hid corn inside a mountain to keep it for themselves while the other animals were starving. Cocijo, the god of rain, lightning, and storms, split the mountain open with a thunderbolt, scattering red, white, yellow, and blue kernels far and wide.

Over time, local tribes selectively cultivated corn and carried their chosen seeds with them as they migrated throughout North and South America. By the time early settlers arrived in North America, they found Native Americans growing corn and preparing it in many forms, including flatbreads, pone, and cakes.

The colonists learned to grow and use corn themselves. In regions where wheat did not grow well, they substituted cornmeal for flour in many recipes. Different regions and communities developed their own favorite styles of cornbread. In the North, cornbread became sweeter and more cake-like, while in the South, cooks often baked savory, crusty cornbread in cast-iron skillets.

Northern-style cornbread is often sweetened with sugar, honey, syrup, molasses, or a combination of sweeteners. It usually combines cornmeal with wheat flour in varying ratios, sometimes as much as one-to-one. In some regions, cornbread was traditionally made with white cornmeal rather than yellow.

This recipe comes from Cassie Dague Ahearn, who grew up in Ohio with this classic style of northern cornbread and later shared it with her Vermont friends. Cassie’s recipe uses granulated sugar, about half as much flour as cornmeal, and just enough sweetness to give it the familiar northern flavor. Unlike many northern bakers, who use cake pans for their cornbread, Cassie baked hers in a cast-iron skillet.