



"Top Chef" Contestant Dishes Kitchen Secrets, Fall Recipes

Where D.C. local Carla Hall shops, and secrets from her home kitchen

By **AIDA AHMED**

Updated 6:15 AM EDT, Wed, Oct 14, 2009



Aida Ahmed, NBCWashington.com

Riverdale Park Farmer's Market got a special chef demonstration last Thursday -- "Top Chef" finalist and D.C. local **Carla Hall**, who whipped up an original fall dish in front of an audience. Hall, who finished in the top three of Season 5 of the Bravo reality show, is chef and owner of the D.C. area's **Alchemy Caterers**.

After the demo, she shared a few food secrets and hinted that we might see her on TV again:

NBCWashington.com: Where did you get the idea for the creamy grits in your recipe?

Chef Carla Hall: I love grits, polenta, oatmeal, all of those cereals and grains. I really don't cook at home for pleasure; my husband cooks at home. I only cook when I am going on a holiday. Last week I was seeing friends in **Boston** and it seemed like I should be able to make grits from cold water (I was doing shrimp and grits). So the next day I tried the grits with the cold water!

NBC: So who's cooking Thanksgiving dinner at your house?

CH: Well, I'm cooking for my client and hopefully my husband is cooking for me!

NBC: Where do you grocery shop regularly?

CH: I do the farmer's markets but then I also do **Whole Foods**.

NBC: Planning any new chef ventures in the Washington area?

CH: If it works out, the Stevens School project with [Hickok Cole Architects](#) and [Equity Residential](#). I'm partnering with a developing company that has this student school project. It will be three years before that gets off the ground. So we'll see how it flies.

NBC: **Should we expect to see you on any more shows?**

CH: Maybe. You may expect to see me on TV!

NBC: **Any fall favorites or recipes you'd like to share?**

CH: I love soups! Any apples, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, late harvest corn, chowders, all of those are great ingredients! And I love duck and corn bread, all these little grain things -- love, love, love! *[See recipe below.]*

NBC: **Do you recommend any substitutions for people who are trying to be healthier?**

CH: I think for cream, for instance if there's a cream-based soup and you're vegan, vegetarian or watching your weight, you can use silken tofu and purée it in there. Also think about using herbs in your desserts. It adds another flavor and you're not going so sweet, but almost savory with a little bit of sugar or a sugar substitute like agave.

If you couldn't make it to the demo, then you're still in luck. Chef Hall left us with the recipe for her delicious grits. Enjoy!

Creamy Grits in Winter Squash Broth with Pumpkin Seeds *(Makes 6-8 servings)*

Squash Broth:

3 lbs. assorted winter squash
1 leek, roughly chopped
2 yellow onions, chopped
3 carrots, peeled and roughly chopped
2 stalks celery, roughly chopped
2 Serrano peppers, roughly chopped
4 garlic cloves, smashed
1 tablespoon black peppercorns
1 tablespoon dried thyme
1 tablespoon whole coriander
2 bay leaves
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon ground coriander
Salt and pepper, to taste

Creamy Grits:

2 cups stone-ground grits
3 cups whole milk
3 cups vegetable broth
Salt, to taste
3 tablespoons butter
1 butternut squash, diced finely
1/2 cup Parmesan cheese, finely shredded

1. Prepare the broth: If using carnival or acorn squash cut in quarters, then scoop out the seeds. Put everything in the pot. (If using butternut squash -- peel, halve, then scoop out seeds. Cut the

butternut squash into smaller pieces.) Place all the ingredients (including seeds) into a large stock pot and fill with cold water at least 3" over the vegetables. Bring to a rolling boil; then reduce the heat to low. Simmer the stock for at least 1 1/2 hours. Strain. Reserve squash flesh. Combine stock and squash flesh; add cumin and ground coriander. Purée until smooth. Adjust seasoning.

2. Prepare the grits: In a five-quart pot, combine milk and stock. Generously season the mixture with salt. Pour grits into the cold liquid and bring the mixture to a boil, stirring constantly. Immediately reduce heat to a simmer and continue to stir until grits are soft and creamy, at least 20 minutes. If necessary, add more stock to continue cooking grits.

3. While the grits are simmering, sauté the butternut squash in olive oil with fresh thyme. Cook in small batches until all the squash has been cooked. Set aside.

4. Stir sautéed squash and Parmesan cheese into grits. Serve broth in bowls with a spoonful of creamy grits. Top with toasted pumpkin seeds.

Recipe by Carla Hall.