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Congee

Level: Easy

Serves 6 or Makes 8 cups

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“...you can make it with any kind of rice (any combination of white, brown, black, green, or red), or (my favorite variation) a fifty-fifty blend of rice and millet, or any whole grains. Really. The method basically amounts to taking the trifecta of messed-up rice cookery (using too much water, stirring, and overcooking), and owning it.

All forms of congee are equally happy made plain, or with tiny slivers of fish or chicken. Congee can be made with water and also with stock or broth for an exceptionally bolstering concoction. Its grainy simplicity is a nice ramp-up to recovery from any blow—emotional, physical, or digestive. If you tuck some roasted squash or garlicky greens into the basket, along with some peppy condiments, every member of the receiving line can make it how they like it.”

Ingredients

1 cup short-grain brown rice or other whole grains (see headnote)
10 cups water (or a mixture of water and broth)
1 teaspoon kosher salt

For Chicken or Fish Congee (optional)

1 whole boneless chicken breast, or ½ pound mild white fish
2 teaspoons cornstarch (if using chicken; omit for fish)
1 teaspoon salt
Freshly ground pepper
½ teaspoon sesame oil

To Serve

Finely minced fresh ginger
Coarsely chopped fresh cilantro
Minced scallions
Sesame oil
Tamari or soy sauce
Hot sauce

Combine the rice and water in a large heavy pot. Bring to a boil, stir quite thoroughly, then turn the heat as low as it will go and simmer gently, covered, for 1½ hours. Really. Stir occasionally, at closer intervals at the start of cooking, to keep the grains suspended, and as you near the end of cooking to make sure the porridge doesn't scorch on the bottom once it begins to thicken.

When the congee is done, it will look like a thick, smooth gruel with barely visible rice kernels (think oatmeal) and if you've never tried it, you will wonder what in the world I am having you do. Stir in the salt. Now you have plain congee, and you can stop there and go straight for the garnish.

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If you want chicken congee, then while the rice is simmering, finely sliver the chicken breast (using a very sharp knife and a partially frozen piece of chicken will simplify this task immeasurably). Don't try to make it perfect, just chop it tiny as best you can. Toss the chicken in a small bowl with the cornstarch, salt, a few grinds of pepper, and sesame oil. The attempt to toss will lead to a worrisome clump, but mix as well as possible and it will work out fine in the end. When the congee is done, take it off the heat, stir the seasoned chicken into the pot, and keep stirring to separate the chicken pieces, until the chicken meat turns white. It will cook in a jiffy in the heat of the hot porridge.

If you are making fish congee, season the raw fish with the salt, a few grinds of pepper, and the sesame oil. Portion the fish among the bowls and ladle the hot rice over it. This will cook the fish.

Garnish bowls of congee with a sprinkle of ginger, cilantro, and scallions, a light drizzle each of sesame oil and soy sauce, and if you are feeling the need for some heat, a little kick of hot sauce.