

Seafood and Okra Gumbo

For 24 appetizer servings or 12 main-dish servings

The chances of two Louisiana cooks coming up with gumbos that are exactly alike are about the same as the New Orleans Saints football team winning two Super Bowls in succession. Gumbo, which can be light as broth or thick as stew, is the quintessential dish of both Creole and Cajun cooking. It dates back more than 200 years, from the time Africans first began to appear in New Orleans and Southwest Louisiana's Cajun country. The word itself comes from *quingombó*, a west-African word for okra.

But okra is just the beginning of a very long list of possible ingredient combinations in a single gumbo. Almost any meat or seafood could conceivably be found, although the ones most often used are shrimp, crab, oysters, crawfish, chicken, turkey, pork sausages and ham, alone or in various combinations. During the days when meat was not eaten during the period of Lent, as Easter Sunday approached, New Orleans Roman Catholics came up with *gumbo aux herbes* ("gumbo z' herbes" in the old Creole dialect), made with little more than a variety of torn greens and seasonings.

Traditionally, gumbos were thickened with either *roux* (flour browned in lard or oil) or *filé* (ground sassafras leaves). This one takes a different path and uses both. The main ingredients, however, are the classic combination of oysters, shrimp and crab.

- 2 pounds yellow onions, chopped
- 2 pounds green sweet peppers, chopped
- 1 pound red sweet peppers, chopped
- 3 celery stalks, chopped
- ¾ pound fresh okra, sliced in half-inch rounds
- 1 cup fresh plum tomatoes, chopped
- 2 tablespoons minced garlic
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 6 quarts seafood stock, divided
- 3 tablespoons dried thyme leaves
- 2 tablespoons dried basil leaves
- 2 tablespoons dried oregano leaves
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 2 teaspoons sweet paprika
- 1½ teaspoons freshly ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon crushed red pepper
- 4 whole small bay leaves
- 3 cups coarsely chopped fresh oysters
- 1½ cups crab claw meat
- 1 cup peeled and chopped medium shrimp
- 3 tablespoons fresh filé powder*

NOTES

The color of the roux in this recipe is keyed to the color chart on page 415.

It's best to buy filé in very small quantities and use it as soon as possible. Also, it is important to use very fresh filé, and to add it at the end of the cooking process.

The gumbo can be prepared a day or two ahead, but the filé should be added after the gumbo has been reheated for serving. Filé becomes unstable; that is, it breaks down when it's returned to high heat if it has already been incorporated into the liquid.

ADVANCE STEP

Prepare the recipe for seafood stock on page 394.



cooked long-grain white rice, for serving
hot or mild pepper sauce, for the table
saltine crackers or crusty French bread, for the table

*If this ingredient is difficult to find where you live, see *Ingredient Sources* on page 424.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT

- A heavy 12-quart stockpot or Dutch oven
- A long-handled metal whisk
- A wooden spoon

1. In a large mixing bowl, combine the onions, green and red sweet peppers, celery, okra, tomatoes and garlic. Set aside.
2. In a heavy 12-quart stockpot, heat the oil over medium-high heat until hot, about four minutes. Very slowly (so you won't burn yourself) add the flour, whisking constantly and thoroughly with a long-handled metal whisk until all the flour has been added and the mixture is smooth.
3. Reduce the heat to medium-low. Continue cooking the roux, whisking constantly so it doesn't scorch, until it turns a dark chocolate brown, about four minutes.
4. With a wooden spoon promptly stir in the reserved vegetable mixture—the onions, peppers, celery, etc.—and cook until the vegetables are soft, about 15 minutes, stirring almost constantly.
5. Add 1 quart of stock to the roux mixture, whisking thoroughly until all the roux dissolves and blends into the liquid. Remove from heat momentarily.
6. In a small mixing bowl, thoroughly combine the thyme, basil, oregano, chili powder, kosher salt, paprika, black pepper, crushed red pepper and bay leaves.
7. Stir this seasoning mixture into the roux mixture containing the 1 quart of stock. Gradually add the remaining 5 quarts of stock, stirring constantly.
8. Bring the gumbo to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for one and a half hours, stirring occasionally and skimming any fat that rises to the surface. By the end of the cooking time the gumbo should have thickened to the consistency of cream.
9. Taste and adjust the seasonings to your liking.

If you're making the gumbo ahead, let it cool at this point, then cover and refrigerate it until it is time to reheat and proceed with the recipe.

10. Next, thoroughly stir in the oysters, crabmeat and shrimp. Cook the shellfish until they are just done, about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and serve.

Serving Suggestions: Immediately before serving the gumbo, whisk in the filé. Ladle the gumbo into heated cups or soup bowls over rice, or pass the rice at the table, along with pepper sauce and saltine crackers or French bread. **S**