

Cooking Gumbo

By Cindy Hudson

Shortly after I moved to Portland from my hometown of Brusly, Louisiana, my new friend, Margaret, asked if I would cook a gumbo at her home for a group of ten people. It was 1985 and Chef Paul Prudhomme was popularizing Cajun cooking throughout the country.

“I’d love to,” I told her without mentioning that while I had eaten lots of great gumbo in my life, I had never actually cooked it. My mama was the chef at home, the one who had browned countless rouxs, carefully stirring each until the mixture of oil and flour was dark and nutty, to make the best seafood gumbo around. I should have absorbed some of that expertise while I still lived under her roof, but there had never seemed a reason until that moment. Long-distance calls were precious on my limited budget back then, but I had to get this gumbo right, so I called mama for advice.

“The roux is the most important ingredient in a gumbo,” she said. “You have to use equal parts oil and flour and stir until it turns dark brown, but be careful not to let it burn. If it burns, you’ll have to start over.” “You also need to fry your okra on the side until the slime disappears,” she advised. “That will keep the okra from overpowering the taste of your seafood.”

Armed with a bagful of onions, green bell peppers, garlic, celery, okra, shrimp, crab and oysters, along with the proper amounts of oil and flour, I showed up on Margaret’s doorstep on a cold, winter night to make the first of what has become many pots of gumbo served to both family and friends since then.

Hot gumbo ladled over steaming rice and sprinkled with a little filé to thicken it is perfect to dish up on cold winter nights. Serve it with a green salad and cornbread muffins, and you have a meal that’s easy to prepare in advance so you can relax and enjoy dinner. And because gumbo can be made with either seafood delicacies or leftovers from the fridge, it’s easy to put together and serve at both special occasions and relaxed family dinners. Here are three of my favorite gumbo recipes.

Seafood Gumbo

- 2 lbs. shrimp, peeled and de-veined
- 1 lb. crabmeat
- 1 dozen oysters (optional)
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 large green bell pepper, chopped
- 1 10 oz. package frozen okra, chopped
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 cup vegetable oil or butter
- 1 cup flour
- salt, pepper and cayenne pepper to taste

Heat roux in a large soup pot. Stir in onion, garlic, green pepper, and celery. Sauté together over medium-high heat until vegetables are softened, about 10 minutes.

In another skillet, sauté okra over medium-high heat in a little oil until slime disappears. Scrape into vegetable mixture and add one gallon of water. Salt and pepper to taste. Simmer together over low heat about an hour and a half. Stir in seafood and simmer until shrimp are cooked throughout, about 10 minutes. Serve over cooked rice. Sprinkle filé on top to thicken.

Shrimp and Andouille Gumbo

- 2 lbs. shrimp, peeled and de-veined
- 2 lbs. andouille sausage, cooked and cut into 2" pieces
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 large green bell pepper, chopped
- 1 10 oz. package frozen okra, chopped
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 cup vegetable oil or butter
- 1 cup flour
- salt, pepper and cayenne pepper to taste

Heat roux in a large soup pot. Stir in onion, garlic, green pepper, celery and andouille. Sauté together over medium-high heat until vegetables are softened, about 10 minutes.

In another skillet, sauté okra over medium-high heat in a little oil until slime disappears. Scrape into vegetable mixture and add one gallon of water. Salt and pepper to taste. Simmer together over low heat about an hour and a half. Stir in shrimp and simmer until they are cooked throughout, about 10 minutes. Serve over cooked rice. Sprinkle filé on top to thicken.

Chicken and Andouille Gumbo

- 3–4 lb. fryer chicken cut in pieces
- 2 lb. andouille sausage, cooked and cut into 2-inch pieces
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 large green bell pepper, chopped
- 1 10 oz. package frozen okra, chopped
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 cup vegetable oil or butter
- 1 cup flour
- salt, pepper and cayenne pepper to taste

Heat roux in a large soup pot. Add chicken and fry over medium-high heat until well browned and cooked throughout, about 20 minutes. Stir in onion, garlic, green pepper, and celery. Sauté together until vegetables are softened, about 10 minutes. Add andouille.

In a separate skillet, sauté okra over medium-high heat in a little oil until slime disappears. Scrape into pot with chicken, sausage and vegetables, and add one gallon of water. Salt and pepper to taste. Simmer together over low heat about two hours. Serve over cooked rice. Sprinkle filé on top to thicken.

First You Start With a Roux

For years I only made my roux on the stovetop. But recently I was cooking gumbo with mama and she surprised me by saying she only cooks her roux in a microwave now. It certainly is faster, but you miss out on breathing in the aromas rising from the pot, which change from bland and oily to rich and nutty, as it cooks. Here's how to make it both ways.

Stovetop

Mix an equal amount of flour and butter or vegetable oil in a large soup pot. On medium heat, stir constantly until mixture begins to thicken and turn brown, about 10 to 15 minutes. Lower the heat and continue stirring briskly until roux turns dark brown and emits a nutty aroma. Remove from heat immediately and continue stirring until roux cools.

Microwave

Mix an equal amount of flour and butter or vegetable oil in a microwave-safe bowl. Cover and microwave on high for two minutes. Remove from microwave and stir carefully to avoid splatters. Microwave for one minute, remove and stir. Repeat this procedure shortening the amount of time in the microwave as the roux begins to darken. When it reaches dark brown, remove and stir until the roux cools.