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gumbo
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Salt. Pepper. Bay leaves. Chopped parsley. Sliced green onions. Vegetable oil. Browned flour. Diced celery. Green bell peppers. Minced garlic. Chopped basil. Frozen okra. Chopped thyme. Shellfish stock. Tomatoes. And your preference of meat or shellfish such as shrimp, sausage, chicken, gizzard or crab.

Prepare all of your ingredients beforehand and sets them to the side.

First step: Make a shellfish stock (you can use water as a substitute). Next, bring the shellfish stock to medium-high heat. Slowly whisk in some flour until a brown mixture is achieved. Stir in sliced onions, diced celery, green bell peppers and garlic into the mixture. For about three to five minutes, sauté the seasonings.

Out of all the creole dishes in South Louisiana, this one seems to be the most famous and popular: Gumbo.

Just like any dish, gumbo is associated with the mixture of different cultures coming together to make a great dish. Most people eat gumbo during the holidays and their most memorable moments of the holidays are of them helping their mother or grandmother cook the gumbo.

Chef Randy Cheramie, instructor at Chef John Folse Culinary Institute, says most people learn how to cook gumbo from their mother or grandmother, whom he says makes the best gumbo. He says gumbo is passed down family lines and that it's a personal thing.

Hours are spent with family in the kitchen peeling shrimp or chopping seasonings in preparation for gumbo. The time it takes to make gumbo allows for families to bond.

The second step: Make sure the mixture of ingredients is smooth-like. Once it's smooth, stir in bay leaves, chopped thyme, tomatoes and okra. Taste occasionally and add in a pinch of salt, pepper and creole seasoning of your choice. Let the mixture simmer for about 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in your choice of shellfish or meat and continue to cook for an additional 15 minutes. Depending on your desired consistency of the mixture, additional stock and seasoning can be added. Add the green onions and parsley. Add another dash of salt, pepper and creole seasoning.

Stir. Taste!

You can learn a lot about the history of southern food by studying and tasting a bowl of gumbo. The name itself conjures up a rich collection of ingredients mixing together in a single pot and melting into something rich and delicious. Gumbo represents the contrast and mixing of three cultures— European, Native American and West African. Each culture left a lasting footprint on the creole dish by contributing their unique flavors and cultures.

The first references of gumbo appeared about the 19th century. Gumbo can be referred to as an example of the melting-pot nature of Louisiana. After time and contributions from the creole culture, gumbo shifted from being a dish associated with the West Indies to a dish associated with New Orleans.

“It's our comfort food. It's our quintessential dish. It's seven nations that have their hand in the pot—the American Indians, the Africans, the Spanish, the English, the Italians, the Germans. You take one of those guys out and we don't have gumbo. People from different areas of the world talk and share their unique and regional cuisine,” Cherie says.

After tasting, cook an additional three to five minutes to make sure the seafood or meat is cooked. Serve a generous portion in a large soup bowl over steamed white rice.

This is just one way to cook this creole dish but there are many different combinations of ingredients that can go into this dish. This overall process takes about three hours.

Chef Cheramie does not prefer one style of gumbo over the other. Instead, he says his favorite type of gumbo is whichever one he decides to cook that day.

There are three types of gumbo (chicken and sausage gumbo, seafood gumbo and gumbo herbs). Seafood gumbo and sausage and chicken gumbo are the two primary types of gumbos that people are most familiar with. Seafood gumbos usually include crabs, shrimp and oysters. Gumbo herbs is a gumbo that only consist of vegetables. This type of gumbo contains a variety of greens such as spinach, collards, mustard, chard, turnips, parsley, cabbage, bell peppers, celery and garlic. This gumbo is usually the most popular during lent season, holy Thursday or good Friday.

“What goes in a gumbo depends on what your philosophy of gumbo is. It goes down family lines as to what you put in gumbo. My family, we’re purist so we don’t believe in mixing and matching gumbo.”

Gumbo can be as thin as soup or as thick as gravy. The proteins can be chicken, sausage, shrimp or crab. The dish is categorized by the type of thickener cooks choose to use. The stew can be thickened with okra, a dark roux or powdered sassafras leaves (depending on what you prefer).

Gumbo is very forgiving of the cook. Measurements for the ingredients do not have to be exact because gumbo is solely based on constant tasting and adding ingredients according to your preference. You can spruce up the recipe by any way you want to.

“I believe less is more,” Cherie says. “Some people believe the more you put into gumbo the better. Not necessarily. I think it’s more important that you don’t overcook the seafood.”

Some people associate gumbo with the comfort of home (South Louisiana). Is gumbo anywhere else besides South Louisiana? Of course, but the feeling, history and flavors are completely different. Certain seasonings such as Tony’s Creole Seasoning is only found in southern states so there’s no telling what kind of seasonings are used elsewhere.

Depending on the type of gumbo you choose to make, there are dos and don’ts of gumbo and the possible combinations of gumbo are endless.

One ingredient that arouses conflict among different cooks is the tomato. Some cooks will use it while others would not be caught dead putting a tomato in their gumbo. Tomatoes are mostly used in okra gumbos only.

“It’s all so subjective, isn’t it? I mean what do you like? People are different. I think okra and tomatoes go good together in gumbo,” Cherie says.

One thing that is agreed upon by most cooks is that gumbo should always be served over rice. But this is not always the case. Some cooks like to serve their gumbo with pasta noodles or any other preference.

No matter the cook, who you learned the recipe from, what meats or shellfish you put into gumbo, gumbo is a dish that is cherished and loved by the public.

Gumbo offers something essential to the creole culture of Southern Louisiana. You can go to almost any restaurant in the south and see gumbo on the menu. The roots of gumbo run deep in Louisiana and people can’t seem to get enough of this dish, whether it be during the holidays or anytime of the year. Gumbo represents something more than just a dish.

Gumbo is history. Gumbo is home. Gumbo is family. Gumbo is tradition!