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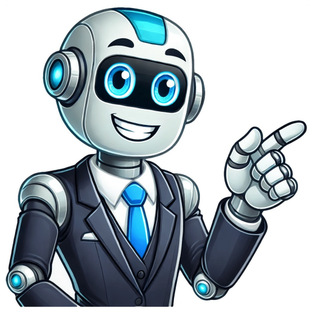

Defined dish gumbo

Gumbo is a hearty and flavorful stew that is considered the unofficial state dish of Louisiana. It is a melting pot of flavors, combining influences from French, Spanish, African, and Native American cuisines. The dish is typically made with a roux, a dark brown mixture of flour and fat, which forms the base of the stew.The Holy Trinity of GumboThe StockThe ProteinThe VegetablesThe RouxThe Holy Trinity of GumboThe foundation of any gumbo is the “Holy Trinity” of vegetables: onions, celery, and bell peppers. These vegetables are sautéed in the roux until softened and caramelized, adding depth of flavor to the stew.The StockTraditionally, gumbo is made with a seafood stock, but it can also be made with meat or vegetable stock. The stock is simmered with the Holy Trinity, creating a rich and flavorful base for the stew.The ProteinThe protein in gumbo can vary depending on region and personal preference. Common options include shrimp, crawfish, crab, chicken, and sausage. The protein is added to the stew and cooked until tender.In addition to the Holy Trinity, gumbo often includes other vegetables such as okra, tomatoes, corn, and potatoes. These vegetables add texture, flavor, and nutrients to the stew.The RouxThe roux is the key to a good gumbo. It is made by slowly cooking flour and fat together until it reaches the desired color and consistency. The darker the roux, the richer the flavor of the gumbo.Gumbo is seasoned with a variety of spices and herbs, including cayenne pepper, black pepper, thyme, oregano, and bay leaves. The seasonings add depth of flavor and a touch of heat to the stew.Variations of GumboThere are many different variations of gumbo, each with its own unique flavor profile. Some of the most popular variations include:Seafood gumbo: Made with a variety of seafood, such as shrimp, crawfish, crab, and oysters.Chicken and sausage gumbo: Made with chicken and smoked sausage.Vegetable gumbo: Made with a variety of vegetables, such as okra, tomatoes, corn, and potatoes.Duck and andouille gumbo: Made with duck and spicy andouille sausage.Gumbo is traditionally served over rice. It can also be served with cornbread or French bread.Gumbo is a culinary masterpiece that embodies the rich cultural heritage of Louisiana. It is a hearty, flavorful, and versatile dish that can be enjoyed by people of all ages. Whether you are a seasoned gumbo lover or trying it for the first time, you are sure to appreciate the unique and delicious flavors of this iconic stew.Frequently Asked Questions1. What is the difference between gumbo and jambalaya?Gumbo is a stew, while jambalaya is a rice dish. Gumbo is made with a roux, while jambalaya is not.2. What is the best way to make a roux?The best way to make a roux is to slowly cook flour and fat together over low heat. Stir constantly to prevent burning.3. What are the essential ingredients in gumbo?The essential ingredients in gumbo are the Holy Trinity (onions, celery, and bell peppers), a roux, and a stock.4. What is the best way to thicken gumbo?The best way to thicken gumbo is to use a dark roux. You can also add okra or cornstarch to the stew.5. What are the most popular proteins used in gumbo?The most popular proteins used in gumbo are shrimp, crawfish, crab, chicken, and sausage.6. What is the best way to serve gumbo?Gumbo is traditionally served over rice. It can also be served with cornbread or French bread.7. What are some of the most popular variations of gumbo?Some of the most popular variations of gumbo include seafood gumbo, chicken and sausage gumbo, vegetable gumbo, and duck and andouille gumbo.8. What is the nutritional value of gumbo?Gumbo is a nutritious dish that is high in protein, fiber, and vitamins. It is also a good source of iron and calcium.9. What are some of the health benefits of gumbo?Gumbo is a healthy dish that can help to reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, and cancer. It can also help to improve digestion and boost the immune system.10. How can I make gumbo at home?There are many different recipes for gumbo, but the basic steps are the same. First, make a roux. Then, add the Holy Trinity and cook until softened. Next, add the stock and protein. Finally, add the vegetables and seasonings. Simmer until the gumbo has thickened and the protein is cooked through. Traditional gumbo, a staple dish of Louisiana cuisine, is a melting pot of flavors, textures, and cultural influences. This hearty stew has been a cornerstone of Southern cooking for centuries, with its rich history and diverse ingredients making it a fascinating subject for food enthusiasts and historians alike. In this article, we will delve into the world of traditional gumbo, exploring its origins, key ingredients, and preparation methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of this beloved dish.Introduction to Gumbo: A Historical PerspectiveGumbo has its roots in the cultural melting pot of Louisiana, where African, French, Spanish, and Native American cuisines blended together to create a unique culinary identity. The dish is believed to have originated in the 18th century, when African slaves in Louisiana combined their traditional okra-based stews with French and Spanish ingredients, such as meat and spices. Over time, gumbo evolved into a distinct culinary genre, with various regional and personal variations emerging throughout the state.The Core Ingredients of Traditional GumboTraditional gumbo typically consists of a combination of ingredients, including protein sources, vegetables, thickeners, and seasonings. The protein sources can vary, but common options include andouille sausage, chicken, seafood, and sometimes beef or pork. The vegetables used in gumbo are just as diverse, with onions, bell peppers, and celery forming the holy trinity of Louisiana cuisine. Okra, filé powder (made from ground sassafras leaves), or roux (a mixture of flour and fat) serve as thickeners, while a blend of herbs and spices, including cayenne pepper, thyme, and oregano, add depth and complexity to the dish.The Role of the Holy Trinity in GumboThe holy trinity of onions, bell peppers, and celery is a fundamental component of gumbo, providing a flavorful foundation for the dish. These aromatics are typically sautéed in oil or fat to create a rich, caramelized base that enhances the overall flavor of the gumbo. The ratio of the holy trinity ingredients can vary depending on personal preference, but a common combination is 2 parts onions, 1 part bell peppers, and 1 part celery.Regional Variations of GumboWhile traditional gumbo is a distinct culinary genre, regional variations and personal interpretations have given rise to a diverse range of gumbo styles. Some of the most notable variations include:Creole gumbo, which originated in New Orleans and typically features a combination of seafood, meat, and tomatoesCajun gumbo, which is commonly found in rural Louisiana and often includes darker roux and a focus on game meats or seafoodOkra gumbo, which relies on okra as the primary thickener and is often associated with African and Caribbean cuisinePreparation Methods for Traditional GumboPreparing traditional gumbo is an art that requires patience, attention to detail, and a deep understanding of the ingredients and techniques involved. The process typically begins with the creation of a roux, which serves as the foundation of the gumbo. The roux is made by combining flour and fat (such as oil or butter) in a pan and cooking it over low heat, stirring constantly, until it reaches the desired color and texture. The color of the roux can range from light blond to dark chocolate, depending on the desired flavor and texture of the gumbo.Adding Ingredients and SeasoningsOnce the roux is prepared, the aromatics (onions, bell peppers, and celery) are sautéed in the roux to create a flavorful base. The protein sources are then added, followed by a combination of vegetables, thickeners, and seasonings. The gumbo is then simmered over low heat, allowing the flavors to meld together and the ingredients to thicken the stew.Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Traditional GumboTraditional gumbo is a testament to the rich cultural heritage of Louisiana, with its diverse ingredients, complex preparation methods, and enduring popularity. Whether you’re a seasoned food enthusiast or just discovering the joys of gumbo, this beloved dish is sure to captivate your senses and leave you wanting more. By understanding the core ingredients, regional variations, and preparation methods involved in traditional gumbo, you’ll be well on your way to creating your own delicious and authentic gumbo dishes. So why not give it a try? With its rich flavors, hearty texture, and cultural significance, traditional gumbo is a culinary experience you won’t soon forget.What is the origin of traditional gumbo, and how has it evolved over time?Traditional gumbo is a dish that originated in Louisiana, specifically in the southern region of the state. The dish has a rich history, with its roots dating back to the 18th century when African, French, and Spanish cultures converged in the region. The name “gumbo” is derived from the African word “ki ngombo,” which refers to a type of okra used in the dish. Over time, gumbo has evolved to incorporate various ingredients and cooking techniques, reflecting the cultural diversity of Louisiana.The evolution of gumbo has been shaped by the state’s unique cultural landscape, with different ethnic groups contributing their own ingredients and cooking methods. For example, the French introduced the use of roux as a thickening agent, while the Africans brought okra and other staple ingredients. The Spanish, on the other hand, introduced tomatoes and other ingredients that are now characteristic of the dish. Today, traditional gumbo remains a beloved staple of Louisiana cuisine, with various regional variations and interpretations that reflect the state’s rich cultural heritage. Despite its evolution, the core ingredients and cooking techniques of traditional gumbo remain unchanged, making it a timeless and authentic representation of Louisiana’s culinary traditions.What are the essential ingredients of traditional gumbo, and how do they contribute to its flavor and texture?The essential ingredients of traditional gumbo include a combination of meats, vegetables, and seasonings. The dish typically starts with a roux made from flour and fat, which serves as a thickening agent and provides a rich, nutty flavor. The roux is then combined with a variety of ingredients, including okra, onions, bell peppers, celery, and a protein source such as andouille sausage, chicken, or seafood. The ingredients are cooked together in a flavorful broth, which is seasoned with a blend of herbs and spices, including thyme, oregano, cayenne pepper, and filé powder.The combination of ingredients in traditional gumbo contributes to its unique flavor and texture. The roux provides a thick, velvety texture, while the okra adds a subtle sliminess that helps to thicken the dish. The meats and seafood add protein and flavor, while the vegetables provide a pop of color and texture. The seasonings, including the herbs and spices, add depth and complexity to the dish, with the filé powder providing a distinctive earthy flavor. The slow-cooked broth brings all the ingredients together, infusing the dish with a rich, savory flavor that is characteristic of traditional gumbo.What is the role of roux in traditional gumbo, and how is it prepared?The roux is a fundamental component of traditional gumbo, serving as a thickening agent and providing a rich, nutty flavor to the dish. The roux is made by combining flour and fat, such as oil or butter, in a pan and cooking it over low heat, stirring constantly, until it reaches a dark brown color. The roux can be made with a variety of fats, including vegetable oil, lard, or butter, each of which imparts a unique flavor to the dish. The color of the roux is critical, as it determines the flavor and texture of the gumbo.The preparation of the roux is a time-consuming process that requires patience and attention to detail. The flour and fat must be cooked slowly, stirring constantly, to prevent the roux from burning or becoming too dark. The ideal color for the roux is a dark brown, which is achieved after about 20-30 minutes of cooking. Once the roux is prepared, it is combined with the other ingredients, including the meats, vegetables, and seasonings, to create the gumbo. The roux serves as a foundation for the dish, providing a rich, flavorful base that is enhanced by the other ingredients. With practice and patience, making a good roux becomes second nature, and it is an essential skill for anyone looking to master the art of traditional gumbo.How do different types of protein, such as andouille sausage and seafood, contribute to the flavor and texture of traditional gumbo?The type of protein used in traditional gumbo can greatly impact the flavor and texture of the dish. Andouille sausage, for example, adds a spicy, smoky flavor to the gumbo, while seafood such as shrimp and crab provide a delicate, sweet flavor. The protein source can also affect the texture of the dish, with sausage and chicken adding a hearty, chunky texture, while seafood provides a lighter, more delicate texture. The combination of proteins used in traditional gumbo is often a matter of personal preference, with some recipes calling for a single type of protein, while others use a combination of meats and seafood.The use of different proteins in traditional gumbo also reflects the cultural and regional diversity of Louisiana cuisine. Andouille sausage, for example, is a staple of Cajun cuisine, while seafood is more commonly used in Creole cooking. The combination of proteins used in traditional gumbo can also be influenced by the time of year and the availability of ingredients. For example, during the winter months, gumbo may be made with sausage and chicken, while during the summer months, seafood may be more prominent. Regardless of the protein source used, the key to a great gumbo is to cook the ingredients slowly and patiently, allowing the flavors to meld together and the textures to combine in a rich, satisfying way.What is the significance of the “holy trinity” of onions, bell peppers, and celery in traditional gumbo?The “holy trinity” of onions, bell peppers, and celery is a fundamental component of traditional gumbo, providing a flavorful and aromatic base for the dish. These three ingredients are sautéed together in oil to create a mixture that is both sweet and savory, with the onions and bell peppers adding a natural sweetness, while the celery provides a fresh, herbal flavor. The holy trinity is typically cooked until the vegetables are soft and fragrant, at which point they are combined with the roux and other ingredients to create the gumbo.The significance of the holy trinity in traditional gumbo lies in its ability to add depth and complexity to the dish. The combination of onions, bell peppers, and celery provides a rich, layered flavor that is both familiar and comforting. The holy trinity is also a nod to the cultural heritage of Louisiana cuisine, reflecting the influence of French, Spanish, and African cooking traditions. In traditional gumbo, the holy trinity is often cooked with a variety of other ingredients, including garlic, thyme, and oregano, to create a flavorful and aromatic broth that is the foundation of the dish. By using the holy trinity as a base, cooks can create a wide range of gumbo variations, each with its own unique flavor and character.How does the use of filé powder and other spices contribute to the unique flavor of traditional gumbo?The use of filé powder and other spices is a critical component of traditional gumbo, providing a unique and distinctive flavor to the dish. Filé powder, which is made from ground sassafras leaves, adds a earthy, herbal flavor to the gumbo, while other spices such as thyme, oregano, and cayenne pepper provide a savory, slightly spicy flavor. The combination of spices used in traditional gumbo can vary depending on the region and personal preference, but filé powder is a staple of the dish, providing a flavor that is both familiar and iconic.The use of filé powder and other spices in traditional gumbo reflects the cultural and culinary heritage of Louisiana. The spice blend used in gumbo is often a combination of French, Spanish, and African influences, with each culture contributing its own unique flavors and ingredients. The use of filé powder, in particular, is a nod to the Native American influence on Louisiana cuisine, as sassafras was a staple ingredient in many Native American dishes. By using a combination of spices, including filé powder, cooks can create a gumbo that is both authentic and delicious, with a flavor that is uniquely Louisiana.What are some common variations of traditional gumbo, and how do they reflect the cultural and regional diversity of Louisiana cuisine?There are many variations of traditional gumbo, each reflecting the cultural and regional diversity of Louisiana cuisine. Some common variations include seafood gumbo, which features a variety of seafood such as shrimp, crab, and oysters, and chicken and sausage gumbo, which is a hearty, comforting dish made with chicken and andouille sausage. Other variations include okra gumbo, which features okra as a thickening agent, and filé gumbo, which is made with filé powder and is often served over rice.The variations of traditional gumbo reflect the cultural and regional diversity of Louisiana cuisine, with different regions and communities contributing their own unique ingredients and cooking techniques. For example, the Cajun country of southwestern Louisiana is known for its dark roux and spicy seasonings, while the Creole cuisine of New Orleans is characterized by its use of tomatoes and a lighter, more delicate flavor. The variations of gumbo also reflect the state’s history and cultural heritage, with different ingredients and cooking techniques reflecting the influence of French, Spanish, African, and Native American cuisines. By exploring the different variations of traditional gumbo, cooks can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and culinary heritage of Louisiana, and create dishes that are both authentic and delicious. You can learn a lot about the history of Southern food by studying a bowl of gumbo. The very name conjures up a rich array of ingredients coming together in a single pot and melding into something rich and delicious. It represents the intersection of three cultures—European, Native American, and West African—that created what we know today as Southern cuisine. "These days, gumbo is closely associated with Louisiana and, more specifically, with Cajun cuisine, and for good reason. But it's actually far older than the Cajun presence in Louisiana, and historically, it has a much broader regional footprint." In the case of gumbo, though, we really need to phrase it as the intersection of African, Native American, and European cultures, for that ordering more accurately captures the sequence in which the dish unfolded. These days, gumbo is closely associated with Louisiana and, more specifically, with Cajun cuisine, and for good reason. But it's actually far older than the Cajun presence in Louisiana, and historically, it has a much broader regional footprint. It's a prime example of how West African foodways took root in the Southern colonies and, over time, gave birth to some of the region's most iconic dishes. Not this. Sherry Main, Flickr At its most basic, what we call gumbo today is a savory stew made with a variety of meats or shellfish combined with an array of vegetables and herbs. From there, all bets are off. Gumbo can be as thin as soup or as thick as gravy. The proteins might be chicken and crab or sausage and shrimp. The stew might be thickened with okra, with filé (powdered sassafras leaves), with a dark roux (a blend of oil and flour cooked slowly until well browned), or any combination of the three. Despite all this diversity, gumbo's development follows a logical progression, provided you can cut through a lot of bad assumptions and outright nonsense to get to it. Let's start with the biggest red herring of all, the oft-repeated idea that gumbo is a variation of bouillabaisse, the classic fish stew from Provence. This notion is repeated everywhere from slapdash food blogs to peer-reviewed academic books. It's also completely wrong. Yes, bouillabaisse is French, and a lot of French people migrated to Louisiana, where they ended up eating gumbo. But the two dishes are made in wholly different ways. Bouillabaisse begins with a rich broth to which an array of bone-on fish and shellfish are gradually added. The finished stew is served over or under slices of bread topped with rouille, a sort of saffron-laced mayonnaise. Even back in the 19th century, almost every commentary on bouillabaisse notes that the key to the dish is the variety of fin-fish used to make it, and that simmering that fish is vital to add complexity to the broth. Of all the variations on gumbo out there, none of them start with broth in a pot, and even today fin-fish are almost never part of the dish. 19th century recipes make clear that okra and tomatoes were the original base ingredients, and the first protein that consistently found its way into the pot was chicken. Only later were shellfish like oysters and shrimp incorporated. It takes a remarkable leap of imagination—or, perhaps, a dull lack of it—to think that gumbo evolved from bouillabaisse. So how did that connection come to be made in the first place? Lolis Eric Elie has a few ideas. A New Orleans native, Elie was a columnist for the Times-Picayune for 14 years, then became a script editor for the acclaimed HBO series Treme and now for AMC's Hell on Wheels. He has also been one of the strongest voices decrying the whitewashing of gumbo. In a 2010 article for Oxford American, he methodically blasted food writers' long-standing habit of ignoring the contributions of black cooks to Louisiana's cuisine. Instead, he argued, those writers twist and bend to invent tenuous connections to every European food culture from Spain to New England—including crediting French elites with the first gumbo. I asked Elie why he thought the bouillabaisse explanation has had such staying power. "The assumption has been," he says, "that anything you don't understand about New Orleans culture when you are an American, you assume that it's French." But the French mystique can lead us astray. "Until relatively recently, we never studied the African influence on American culture," Elie says. "The assumption really was that the Europeans went and got these people who were capable of being taught things, but the people had nothing to contribute, so the assumption was the only contribution was labor." In reality, no one needed to teach Africans how to cook gumbo. They brought its base ingredient with them to the New World and they cooked it using techniques that had been handed down from one generation to the next. Far from being a food tradition unique to Louisiana, gumbo is instead an important part of the larger fabric of African-based foodways in the South as a whole. Jeffreyw, Flickr So if not bouillabaisse, where did gumbo come from? The answer can be found in its very name. In several West African languages, the word for okra is ki ngombo, or, in its shortened form, gombo." Early on, the word was frequently used alongside "okra" by English writers. In the 1840s, when okra was just starting to be grown widely outside the coastal South, newspaper ads commonly offered seeds for "Okra or Gombo." "Gombo" is still the French word for okra today. The roots of gumbo do run deep in Louisiana. Enslaved Africans were brought to the French colony in large numbers starting in 1719, and by 1721 more than half the residents of New Orleans were African. The first known reference to gumbo as a dish was uncovered by historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, who found a handwritten transcription of the interrogation of a 50-year-old slave named Comba in New Orleans in 1764. Suspected of being associated with other slaves who had stolen clothes and a pig, Comba is asked whether she had given a slave named Louis un gombeau, and she replies that she did. A more detailed description was published two decades later in a French journal called Observations sur La Physique, which included an article on the American plant sassafras. The author noted that in Louisiana its leaves were dried and ground into a powder. "These leaves are used in sauces," he wrote. "A pinch of this powder is enough to make a viscous broth." The article also noted, "This is the dish we in America call gombo. However, we must distinguish this American stew from the one called gombo févi (italics added). This is done with the pods of a species of mallow, known to botanists as the sabdariffa." Févi, it turns out, is the Louisiana Creole word for okra, and the author notes that its thickening power is even stronger than that of powdered sassafras, which the Creoles called filé. But which came first, the févi or the filé? Some commentators have argued for filé and claim the word "gumbo" actually comes from kombo, the Choctaw term for powdered sassafras. But I've not been able to turn up a single example of a dish being called "kombo" in any 18th or 19th century source, while there are countless examples of a dish made from okra being called either "gombo" or "gumbo." By the time Peyroux was writing his treatise on sassafras, Africans had been present in Louisiana for some 60 years, plenty long enough for their traditional okra-based stews to have entered the larger culinary culture of the colony. The most probable path is that Louisianians were eating a thick stew they called "gombo" after its main ingredient, okra. Cooks found they could achieve a similar thickness using the filé powder made by the local Choctaw, and they started substituting that when okra wasn't available. Southern Foodways Alliance, Flickr Though well entrenched in Louisiana, gumbo was by no means a dish unique to that region. Indeed, during the colonial era and the early 19th century, similar okra-based stews and soups could be found anywhere a large number of enslaved Africans and their descendants lived—and, in fact, those dishes can still be found there today. Tracing gumbo's roots is complicated by the fact that no African Americans recorded their recipes in cookbooks until after the Civil War, but in the early 19th century, recipes for gumbo started to pop up in writings by white authors. In 1817, the American Star of Petersburg, Virginia, ran an article describing okra, which it noted "is common in the West Indies." It provided two recipes. In the first, an equal amount of cut okra and tomatoes are stewed with onions, butter, and salt and pepper. In the other, okra is stewed in water and dressed with butter. "At St. Domingo," the writer notes, "they are called gambo." Mary Randolph included a similar recipe for "Gumbo—A West India Dish" in The Virginia House-Wife (1824): okra stewed in water and served with melted butter. An 1831 article on okra in the New England Farmer noted the plant's "known reputation in the West Indies" and that, "a very celebrated dish, called Gombo, is prepared in those countries where okra is grown, by mixing with the green pods, ripe tomatoes, and onions; all chopped fine, to which are added pepper and salt, and the whole stewed." The 1841 edition of Webster's Dictionary defined gumbo as "A dish of food made of young capsules of ocra, with salt and pepper, stewed and served with melted butter." In the mid 19th century, gumbo shifted from being a dish associated with the West Indies to one associated with New Orleans, perhaps thanks to the extent to which cooks and diners of all races had embraced it in Louisiana. By the late 1830s, New Orleans newspapers were already incorporating gumbo into jokes and aphorisms as a sort of well-loved local dish. In 1838, the Times-Picayune commented, "Secret of Health—Live Light and eat plenty of gumbo." In 1839, the New Orleans Times opened a light piece on sneezing by commenting, "The greatest luxury we know of, save and except a plate of gumbo, is a real old-fashioned sneeze." Andouilla sausage is another popular New Orleans meat for gumbo. Julia Frost, Flickr Meats started to appear in published gumbo recipes around this time, too. Eliza Leslie's Directions for Cookery (1840) includes recipes for both "Gumbo Soup," which incorporates "a round of beef" along with the okra and tomatoes, and just plain "Gumbo," the traditional stewed okra and tomatoes, which she describes as "a favourite New Orleans dish." More common than beef in gumbo, though, was chicken. The version provided to the Mobile Mercury by Mrs. L. H. Wright in 1858 is typical. First, fry a cut-up chicken "to a nice brown color," presumably in a cast iron skillet over the coals of a fire, then add a large plateful of okra. After cooking it a little, pour over a few quarts of water and let it simmer until the chicken is tender. "The gumbo thus made will be very thick," Mrs. Wright notes, and as in most recipes of the period, she specifies that it be served with "rice boiled tender, but be careful that the grains are separate." That same basic method, often with onions and sometimes tomatoes added, can be found consistently in published recipes until well into the 20th century. Recipes for gumbos made with filé start appearing in print just before the Civil War, suggesting that using powdered sassafras as thickener was starting to spread outside of Louisiana. The Carolina Housewife (1847) includes a recipe for "Okra Soup" made with beef, okra, and tomatoes, as well as one for "New Orleans Gumbo" made with turkey or fowl and onion, to which a hundred oysters and "two teaspoons of pulverized sassafras leaves" are added. A similar chicken-based "Filet gumbo," thickened with filé powder, appears in Miss Leslie's New Cookery Book (1857). Matt the Ogre, Flickr Does the fact that filé appears in a few non-Louisiana cookbooks mean that people outside Louisiana were actually starting to thicken gumbo with filé? What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking (1881), the second oldest known cookbook to have been written by an African-American, can help us answer that. Abby Fisher was born around 1832 in South Carolina, apparently the daughter of a French-born slaveowner and a Carolina-born slave. She wound up in Alabama sometime before the Civil War, and from at least 1869 to 1876 she lived in Mobile with her husband, Alexander C. Fisher, an Alabama-born minister. In the late 1870s the Fishers moved westward to San Francisco, where Abby Fisher made a living as a cook and operated a pickle and preserves business with her husband. Abby Fisher dictated her book to a committee of nine residents of San Francisco (her "lady friends and patrons") just a few years after she arrived on the West Coast. Sassafras leaves, used to make filé powder. Shutterstock A great many 19th century cookbook authors borrowed recipes from any and all sources, so the fact that a recipe appears in a book published in, say, Kentucky, doesn't necessarily mean it's an old Kentucky recipe. The author may very well have borrowed it from an English cookbook, and there's not even a guarantee that he or she had actually tried cooking it. In Abby Fisher's case, it is much more likely that a recipe that appears in her book is something she learned to cook during her years in Alabama and South Carolina, and that she actually cooked it from memory on a regular basis. And that makes her three recipes for gumbo all the more interesting to historians. There's "Ochra Gumbo" with cut okra stewed in beef broth seasoned with just salt and pepper and served with "dry boiled rice." Her "Chicken Gumbo" is made of chicken fried until brown, then added to a soup kettle with sliced okra and onions, covered with water, and simmered. And finally, there's "Oyster Gumbo Soup," which also starts with browned chicken simmered in water, but instead of okra, a quart of fresh oysters are added with their liquor and, at the very end, "one tablespoon of gumbo." There is an outside chance that by "gumbo" Mrs. Fisher meant dried and powdered okra, which appears in a few scattered recipes in the 19th century, but it's far more likely that she was talking about filé powder. Filé powder. Julia Frost, Flickr When I first came across this reference to adding a tablespoon of "gumbo," I was a bit deflated. I was expecting to find a clear divide between the two main 19th century gumbo styles: okra gumbo, a long-standing African tradition, and filé gumbo, a Louisiana adaptation that enlisted a Native American ingredient. I expected that Abby Fisher, whose cooking by all reasonable explanations would have drawn primarily upon her experience in Alabama and possibly South Carolina, wouldn't be one to use filé. But, there it was. It took several days before the realization hit me, and it's an explanation that's easy to miss in this era of frozen foods and vegetables grown in California and Peru and shipped thousands of miles in refrigerated containers. Okra is seasonal, and in the South it can be picked only from July until October. In the 19th century, one couldn't make gombo févi in December or May because there was no okra to put in it. But okra's thickening effect could be simulated in a stew by using dried and powdered sassafras leaves. This idea is consistent with Lolis Eric Elie's memories of gumbo in 20th-century New Orleans. "We always had okra in it when I was growing up," Elie recalls. "But people would always make a distinction between okra and filé gumbo. They said you ate filé gumbo in the winter when okra was out of season." sstrieu, Flickr So here we are, with a West African dish having taken firm root in the American South, most deeply in Louisiana but with a significant footprint in other coastal areas, too. That footprint can still be found today outside of Louisiana, though many diners may not necessarily make a connection between it and Louisiana-style gumbo. When considering gumbo's broader impact on the South, it helps to look to regions beyond Louisiana, such as the coastal Lowcountry of South Carolina. BJ Dennis is a personal chef and caterer in Charleston, South Carolina, and he specializes in Gullah Geechee cuisine. He grew up in the 1980s and 1990s eating traditional Lowcountry foods with West African pedigrees without thinking much about them. It wasn't until he decided to pursue a culinary career that he started really digging into the culinary heritage of his grandparents and their generation. That heritage includes traditional West African-style gumbo, which is often called okra soup in the Lowcountry. "I heard it both ways [growing up]," Dennis says. "Mainly from my grandparents, they would always say okra soup, though I've heard okra gumbo, too." A lot of okra-based dishes in Gullah Geechee cuisine likely have a direct link to 19th century "gombo." Many involve a thick tomato-based sauce in which meat or seafood are cooked along with onions, spices, and, of course, okra. There are plenty of recipes for "okra and tomatoes" and "shrimp and okra", too, that are almost identical to the more basic gumbo recipes being published in the 1820s and 1830s. "Okra was the main staple vegetable in the summertime," Dennis says, "It's one of the few that thrives because it's so hot." Fortuitously, okra is in season at the same time as shrimp, which is a natural flavor match. "They were always the small creek shrimp," Dennis recalls. "Usually you would have that in with some sort of smoked meat." Jeffreyw, Flickr Dennis makes sautéed shrimp and okra in a cast iron skillet, adding onion and garlic along with a little chile and ginger and finishing it with diced tomato and herbs like parsley and thyme. You can find his recipe here. Other Gullah chefs in the Lowcountry are noted for their gumbos and okra dishes, too. At Gullah Cuisine in Mt. Pleasant, Charlotte Jenkins serves her mother's recipe for "okra gumbo", which includes shrimp, chicken, and pork sausage. Bill Green serves shrimp gumbo at his Gullah Grub Restaurant on St. Helena Island, and when okra is in season he makes a shrimp and okra dish that's very similar to Dennis's, including incorporating ginger. Filé powder may have appeared in the Carolina Housewife, but it wasn't much known in the Gullah Geechee communities. They had a different way of making do when the usual ingredients were out of season. "They did a gumbo in wintertime when shrimp season was over," Dennis says. "They took the shrimp and dried them out along with okra in the roofs of the houses. In the winter time [my grandfather's] mother would make okra soup or gumbo. That's a kind of really close to a traditional West African style of gumbo." You might notice that, up to this point, we've not said a word about roux, that third way of thickening gumbo, and one that for many cooks today is the very essence of the dish. That innovation came along later than okra and filé, and we'll look at the story of roux-based gumbos in a later installment. It has taken culinary historians and food writers far too long to recognize the central role that African American cooks played in creating what we know today as Southern cuisine. But those cooks were there from the very beginning, and their contributions were foundational, providing essential ingredients, techniques, and the very sensibility that defines Southern cooking. There's no better way to taste that legacy than with a good bowl of gumbo, and preferably one made with fresh-picked okra.