

First Place Gumbo

Have a craving for a little taste of Louisiana?

Here's a 'winning' recipe

by Lynette Oswald



I have hosted several cooking contests, but never entered one, preferring to avoid the limelight and let others have their fun. I heard that the Coral Casino was planning a "Gumbo Cook-off" but I had no intention of entering it. Louisiana was still on my "Must See Someday" list and I had never made gumbo, never tasted gumbo, never even seen gumbo. But after the third "You've got to enter! You're a cook!" comment, I reconsidered.

So I went to work. What is gumbo? Well, I read, and I read some more. I talked to people in the know, I asked about common ingredients and flavor. What I came up with is gumbo means many different things from a seafood, or chicken, sausage, beef—or any combination of those—soup type potage, sometimes spicy, sometimes not. Okra seemed to be a classic ingredient, so I included that. Two other things became eminently clear, a good gumbo must start with a rich, homemade stock and a good roux. My grandfather, was a great chef and the only "father" I ever knew, and he had taught me exactly how to do both. I was in!

But the competition was stiff, Cyril, an old Louisiana boy—and Biltmore chef—was signed up as well as the Casino Manager, Kevin, who had won the last three cook-offs. All the gumbos were different, some with shrimp, one even had the heads in there. The tasting went on for a full hour, the crowds mingled and whispered, and went back and tasted some more, then silently filled out their ballots.

Lo and behold—I won! I couldn't believe it. I quietly thanked Grandpa, only wishing he could have tasted it.

The Winning Gumbo

The Stock

Mastering chicken stock alone—or just bothering to make it—can lead to an endless array of unforgettable meals, and it's embarrassingly simple, the trick is to let it simmer 8 hours. But I'm warning you; those watery little cans will never be the same to you again. Make an extra batch sometime and freeze in small 1 cup bags to use as needed.

- 5 Quarts cold water
- 2 unpeeled onions, quartered
- 4 celery ribs, halved
- 2 carrots
- 4 smashed cloves of garlic
- 3 1/2 to 4 lbs. of chicken legs, necks, whatever (no livers)

Simmer 8 hours over a low heat, stir occasionally. Drain into a colander lined with a cheesecloth set over a large pot or bowl. When cool enough to handle, squeeze the solids in the cheesecloth and discard. Refrigerate your stock and remove the fat from the top.

Portuguese Sausage and Chicken Gumbo

- 3 lbs. chicken parts
- cayenne pepper, garlic powder and salt
- 1 1/2 cups flour
- vegetable oil (enough to fill an iron frying pan 1 1/2 inch)
- 1 cup of each; celery, green bell pepper and onions, diced
- 12 oz. raw "hot" Portuguese sausage
- 2 t. minced garlic
- 2 cans cut okra, drained

Mix 1 heaping tbs. each of salt, cayenne and garlic powder and rub into the chicken. Pour the flour and 1/2 t. each of salt, cayenne and garlic powder into a big paper bag and shake the chicken in there to coat. Heat oil in the iron pan till just starting to smoke. Fry the chicken till dark golden on both sides, remove and set aside to cool. In another pan sauté the sausage cubes till golden, remove with a slotted spoon and set aside.

Now make your roux: Measure out 3/4 cup of oil from the sausage drippings adding some from the chicken if needed. Return it to the sausage pan over high heat. Measure out 3/4 cup flour from the paper bag (adding some if needed) and toss into hot oil, blending constantly with a long handled whisk. When roux is very dark brown add the diced veggies and turn heat to low. Stir with a wooden spoon about six minutes while bringing 2 quarts of your stock to a boil in a large soup pot. Add your roux and veggies gradually to the boiling stock, stirring. Deglaze roux pan with a ladle of stock and return it to the pot. Add sausage, 2 t. minced garlic, drained okra and salt and pepper to taste. Simmer uncovered over medium-low heat 1 1/2 hours.

While that's cooking, debone and skin your chicken. Cut into 1/2 inch dice and add to the pot during the last 15 minutes of cooking. Adjust seasoning and serve over rice. Holds well.

Shopping hint: All ingredients appearing in bold faced type can be found at City Market, Lazy Acres, Tri-County Produce or Trader Joe's. Lynette Oswald is a professional caterer and freelance writer who lives in Santa Barbara.