

The Recipe: Okra & Tomatoes

Ingredients

For the dish:

- 2 tablespoons bacon fat or butter
- 4 slices bacon, chopped (or 2 ounces salt pork, diced)
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- 1 pound fresh okra, trimmed and sliced into ½-inch rounds
- 3 cups fresh tomatoes, diced (about 6-8 medium tomatoes, or 1 can diced tomatoes if fresh aren't available)
- 1 teaspoon salt (adjust to taste)
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper (optional, for a little heat)
- 1 tablespoon butter (optional, for finishing)
- Fresh basil or parsley (optional, for garnish)

Instructions

Step 1: Cook the Bacon

In a large cast iron skillet or heavy-bottomed pot, cook the chopped bacon over medium heat until it's crispy, about 5-7 minutes. Remove the bacon and set aside, leaving about 2 tablespoons of bacon fat in the pan. *Pro Tip: Cast iron is traditional for this dish and helps distribute heat evenly. If you don't have cast iron, a heavy-bottomed stainless steel or enameled pot works well.* **Step 2: Sauté the Onions** Add the diced onion to the bacon fat and cook over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the onion is soft and translucent, about 5 minutes. Don't rush this step—letting the onion cook slowly builds flavor.

Step 3: Add the Okra

Add the sliced okra to the pan and stir well to coat with the bacon fat and onion. Cook over medium heat for about 5-7 minutes, stirring occasionally. The okra will release some moisture and may seem a bit slimy at first—this is normal. Keep cooking, and the okra will begin to dry out slightly and become more tender. *Pro Tip: Some cooks like to cook the okra a bit longer (8-10 minutes) before adding tomatoes to reduce the sliminess. This is a matter of personal preference.*

Step 4: Add the Tomatoes

Add the diced tomatoes (with their juices if using fresh) to the pan. Stir well to combine. Add the salt, black pepper, and cayenne pepper if using.

Step 5: Simmer

Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer, uncovered, for 15-20 minutes, stirring occasionally. The mixture should bubble gently and reduce slightly. The okra should be tender, and the tomatoes should have broken down into a light sauce. *Pro Tip: If your mixture seems too watery after 15 minutes, increase the heat slightly and cook a bit longer to evaporate excess liquid. If it seems too thick, add a splash of water or broth.*

Step 6: Finish and Taste

Stir in the cooked bacon and the optional tablespoon of butter for richness. Taste and adjust seasoning as needed. Some cooks like a bit more salt or a pinch more cayenne—this is your dish, so season it to your preference.

Step 7: Serve

Serve hot, garnished with fresh basil or parsley if desired. This dish is best served fresh, but it also reheats beautifully.

Pro Tips for Success

1. Use Fresh Okra When Possible

Fresh okra is best, but frozen okra works in a pinch. Avoid canned okra, which tends to be mushy. If using frozen okra, thaw it first and pat it dry to remove excess moisture.

2. Fresh Tomatoes Are Worth the Effort

Summer tomatoes make a huge difference in this dish. If you're making this in winter, good quality canned tomatoes are better than pale, flavorless fresh tomatoes. San Marzano tomatoes are a great choice.

3. Don't Skip the Bacon

The bacon (or salt pork) isn't optional—it provides depth and richness that makes this dish sing. If you're vegetarian, use a bit of olive oil and add a pinch of smoked paprika for depth.

4. Embrace the Okra's Natural Sliminess

Some people are put off by okra's slimy texture. Here's the secret: cook it long enough, and it becomes tender and less slimy. The longer cooking time also allows the okra to absorb the flavors of the tomatoes and bacon.

5. Cast Iron is Traditional

While not required, cooking this dish in cast iron is traditional and helps with heat distribution. If you use cast iron, the seasoning actually improves with each use.

6. Taste as You Go

Every tomato and every batch of okra is different. Taste your dish as it cooks and adjust the seasoning to your preference. Some batches may need more salt; others may need a touch more pepper or cayenne.

Variations: Making It Your Own

Okra & Tomatoes with Corn

Add 1 cup of fresh corn kernels (or frozen corn, thawed) in Step 4 when you add the tomatoes. This adds sweetness and texture.

Spicy Version

Increase the cayenne pepper to ½ teaspoon, or add a diced jalapeño in Step 2 when you sauté the onions.

With Sausage

Replace the bacon with ½ pound of smoked sausage, sliced and browned. This makes it heartier and more of a main dish.

Vegetarian Version

Omit the bacon and use 2 tablespoons of olive oil instead. Add a pinch of smoked paprika and a splash of apple cider vinegar in Step 6 for depth and complexity.

With Garlic

Add 2-3 minced garlic cloves in Step 2 when you sauté the onions. This adds a subtle depth.

Creamy Version

In Step 6, stir in ¼ cup of heavy cream or half-and-half for a richer, creamier dish. This is less traditional but delicious.

What to Serve It With

Okra & Tomatoes is a versatile side dish that pairs well with:

- **Over Rice** – The most traditional way. Serve over fluffy white rice or brown rice.
- **With Cornbread** – A classic pairing. The cornbread soaks up the delicious sauce.
- **Alongside Fried Chicken** – A perfect summer combination.
- **With Shrimp** – Serve alongside shrimp and grits or shrimp over rice.
- **With Pulled Pork** – A great addition to a summer barbecue plate.
- **As a Main Course** – Serve over rice or with cornbread as a light vegetarian meal.

The Lesson: What Okra & Tomatoes Teaches Us

Respect Your Ingredients

This dish teaches us that the best cooking comes from respecting your ingredients. Okra and tomatoes don't need much—just good technique and a little patience. When you respect what you're cooking with, the results are always better.

Simple is Often Best

In a world of complicated recipes and fancy techniques, Okra & Tomatoes reminds us that simple is often best. The most satisfying meals are often the ones with the fewest ingredients and the most straightforward preparation.

Tradition Matters

This recipe has been made the same way for generations because it works. It's been tested, refined, and perfected by countless cooks. When you make Okra & Tomatoes, you're honoring that tradition and keeping something precious alive.

Patience Pays Off

Good cooking takes time. This dish doesn't rush. It simmers gently, allowing flavors to develop and deepen. There's a lesson there about life: the best things often can't be hurried.

A Note on Okra

If you're new to okra, this is the perfect introduction. Okra has a subtle, slightly earthy flavor that's often misunderstood. When cooked properly—as in this dish—it becomes tender and delicious, not slimy or unpleasant. Okra is also incredibly nutritious: it's high in fiber, vitamin C, and antioxidants. It's a vegetable that's been valued in Southern and African cooking for centuries, and for good reason.

Storing and Reheating

Refrigerator: Store leftover Okra & Tomatoes in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 4 days. **Reheating:** Reheat gently over medium-low heat on the stovetop, stirring occasionally. Add a splash of water or broth if it seems too thick. You can also reheat in the microwave, but stovetop reheating is gentler and preserves the texture better. **Freezing:** This dish freezes well for up to 3 months. Thaw in the refrigerator overnight and reheat on the stovetop.

Final Thoughts

Okra & Tomatoes is more than just a recipe. It's a connection to the Lowcountry, to generations of cooks, and to a way of cooking that values simplicity, respect for ingredients, and the joy of sharing food with the people you love. When you make this dish, you're not just cooking dinner. You're participating in a tradition that stretches back decades. You're honoring the cooks who perfected it. And you're keeping something precious alive. So grab some fresh okra and tomatoes, fire up your cast iron, and make this classic dish. Your family will thank you.

What's your favorite way to serve Okra & Tomatoes? Over rice? With cornbread? Share in the comments below—I'd love to hear how you make it!

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