

Okra Stew A home-based lesson plan and recipe

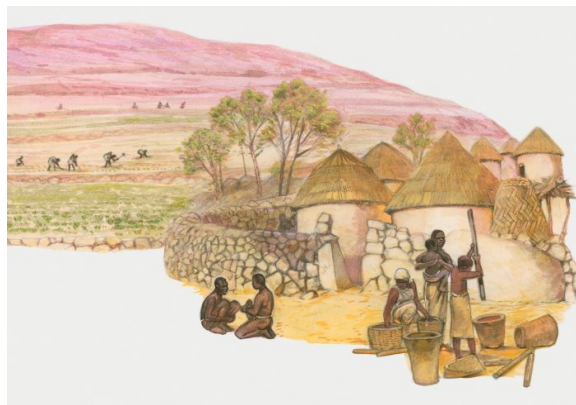
Historical Background

Okra is a **mucilaginous** plant, which is a fancy way to say that okra releases a slimy juice. This sliminess provides thickness and flavor when cooked in a stew. Okra plants can grow six feet tall and their flowers change color during the day, from a pale yellow in the morning to a deep red by sunset. They produce green seed pods that are harvested unripe when they are about 9 inches long.



Photo credit: Alabama Cooperative Extension System

Okra may have originated in southern Ethiopia in ancient times. It spread across Africa during the **Bantu migrations**. Then, following the spread of Islam, okra was introduced to India, Brazil, the West Indies, China, and finally, North America. The english name for *okra* comes from the **Igbo** language of southeastern Nigeria. The **Kimbundu** word for okra is *qingombo*, which is where the word gumbo comes from. Gumbo is a type of soup that usually contains meat and/or seafood along with vegetables and hot spices and is served with rice.



Sub-Saharan Village
Photo credit: Khan Academy

During the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade of the 1600s-1700s, slave traders observed the foods different African peoples ate and transported some of these foods along with enslaved Africans on ships to America. This is how many foods with African origins ended up in America. By the late 18th century, okra had become very popular in the British American colonies. Thomas Jefferson is quoted as saying "Okra is one of Virginia's esteemed garden plants."

It is no surprise that the enslaved ate a lot of okra in their diet. Not only was this crop connected to their heritage, but it also was a cheap, easy, and plentiful crop. Okra provided thickness and flavor to the stews that were the basis of many traditional African diets. Okra was frequently used in a peppery stew which was served with corn mush, rice, or millet. But okra could be prepared in other ways too. Sometimes it was boiled with onions and tomatoes or boiled with cowpeas. Enslaved African Americans also dried the seeds to make a type of coffee. During the Civil War, it was common to sell this brew to white soldiers, both Confederate and Yankee.

Stews were also a staple of the Native American diet. They liked to make stews with different types of meat including owl! To thicken their stew, the Indians used a powder made from dried **sassafras** leaves. However, they soon found that the okra would also thicken their stew.

In the colonial and early American time periods, white southern women often kept receipt, or recipe, books filled with instructions for food preparation and preservation, medical treatments, cleaning formulas, and other useful household tips. Books like *The Virginia Housewife* by Mary Randolph and *The Kentucky Housewife* by Lettice Byran make it clear that okra dishes were taught by enslaved cooks to white women of the time.

Okra stews, especially gumbo, became a signature Southern dish. It is safe to assume that these stews were more popular in the South because more of the enslaved Africans were brought to the South to farm the plantations. Throughout the years, different combinations of okra stews have become popular. For example, Brunswick Stew is a popular Virginia okra stew made with tomatoes, onions, okra, and hot pepper.

Key Words

Mucilaginous - a science term meaning gel-like or slimy

Bantu migrations - the spread of Bantu-speaking people from south West Africa throughout southern Africa from around 3000 BCE to 1000 CE. It's believed that people started moving out of their homeland as farmland turned to desert. The Bantu people had advanced farming and iron-making skills and were welcomed into areas throughout southern Africa. This migration spread Bantu language and culture throughout a large part of the continent.

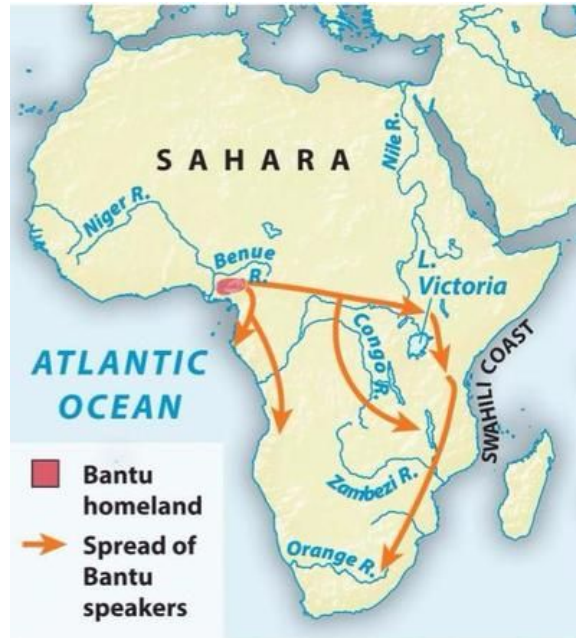


Photo credit: www.sutori.com

Igbo - the principal native language of the Igbo people, an ethnic group of southeastern Nigeria.

Kimbundu - the second-most widely spoken Bantu language in Angola. Its speakers are concentrated in the north-west of the country.

Sassafras - a type of deciduous tree with many culinary and medical uses.



Sassafras Leaves
Photo credit: Wikipedia

Activity - Make Colonial-Inspired Okra Stew

The following recipe is by Tori Avey who was inspired by Mary Randolph's *The Virginia Housewife* (1824) and Mrs. B.C. Howard's *Fifty Years in A Maryland Kitchen* (1881 edition). She made modern updates to the recipe to make it easier to make today. Her use of hot pepper, tomato, and okra served with rice is a connection to similar dishes found from around the world wherever African people settled.



Supplies

- Liquid measuring cup
- Measuring spoons
- Dutch oven or large pot
- Small pot with lid (for rice)

Ingredients

- 1/4 cup butter
- 1 tbsp olive oil (or lard, which would historically be used)
- 1 small onion, diced and dusted with flour
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2 tbsp finely chopped flat leaf parsley
- 1 sprig fresh thyme
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp black pepper (or to taste)
- 1/2 tsp red pepper flakes (or to taste)
- 4 cups vegetable broth (chicken or beef broth can also be used)
- 3 cups water
- 28 ounce can diced tomatoes with juice (or 3 1/2 cups fresh tomatoes, peeled and diced)
- 2 cups fresh young okra cut into slices, or frozen okra pieces
- 2 cups cooked rice

Instructions

1. In a dutch oven or large pot, heat $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of butter and 1 tbsp of oil until melted over medium heat.
2. Add the flour-dusted onion and parsley and cook until onion is translucent and soft. Then add the garlic and cook for a minute more.



3. Add the thyme, salt, black pepper, and red pepper flakes and cook for another minute or so.
4. Add 4 cups of broth, 3 cups of water and the tomatoes and cook on a medium simmer for 30 minutes.



5. Add 2 cups of okra and cook for another 20-25 minutes, or until tender.



6. Ladle the soup over rice, serve and enjoy!



Tips: Not spicy enough for you? You can add more black pepper and red pepper flakes!