

# The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

## Gumbo mojo

We point the way, then it's up to you to make regional favorite your own

By ROSALIND BENTLEY

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Start talking about gumbo, and you find the only constant is that everybody makes theirs differently.

He thinks [seafood](#) in gumbo is heretical, while she thinks one without it isn't worth the bowl it's served in. She wouldn't sprinkle filé in the gumbo while it's still in the cook pot; he thinks okra beats filé as a thickener every time. And get a chef talking about the colors of roux, and it sounds as if he's reciting Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem Sweeties."

Chef helps you find your gumbo mojo

Walnut or cocoa, let me repeat: caramel, brown sugar, a [chocolate](#) treat ...

It's hard not to think about gumbo at this time of year, when Mardi Gras is right around the corner. And New Orleans, still very much a wounded city, won't stop trying to win back residents who fled the city after Katrina. They took little pieces of the city's culinary history with them. Some of those survivors, such as Qiana Crump, call Atlanta home now, and in this new home they are determined to have gumbo their way this Fat Tuesday. Then there are those like Linton Hopkins, chef at Restaurant Eugene in south Buckhead, who aren't New Orleans natives but who learned to cook gumbo like one.

The best gumbo makers abide by a few basics for success — most notably, mastering the roux. But beyond that, "rules can go out the window," Hopkins said. "It's a metaphor for bringing people together."

Gumbo comes from an African word, "kingombo," meaning okra. And though most people associate it with Louisiana, versions of the dish also abound in the South Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry. "Gumbo is totally regional, but the truth is wherever the slave trade went, okra went, and you'll usually find a form of gumbo there," said Poppy Tooker, a noted cooking instructor and founder of the New Orleans Slow Food Convivium. "That means the Caribbean, Haiti, Brazil, Louisiana."

Glen Bray, 47, of Columbus grew up eating gumbo loaded with okra made by his mother, who'd spent her childhood on a farm between Lake Charles and Lafayette, La. For her own children's meals, she'd walk to the local farmers market and come back with a bagful of pods, small and tender.

"Gumbo would be one of the main things we'd eat during the week," Bray said.

On this point, however, most folks who make gumbo agree: There are three possible thickeners for gumbo: okra, filé and roux. They are often used singly, although sometimes they are combined.

When sliced into rounds and stirred for a good while in a pot, the namesake pods break down and thicken the liquid, giving the dish body and rich flavor. Filé, on the other hand, is made of finely ground sassafras leaves and is added in either the final minutes of cooking or sprinkled on after it's served. It imparts a keen, distinct flavor akin to that of tea.

Then there's roux, which is essentially flour and butter. Or flour and vegetable oil. Or flour and shortening or lard. No matter the fat, it's typically stirred in a cast-iron skillet and can vary in shade from caramel to near coffee black. It's as essential as a pot to many cooks.

Qiana Crump makes a kitchen-sink gumbo that has nearly every barnyard animal and sea creature known. She and her husband moved to Jonesboro after they lost everything in Hurricane Katrina. She makes gumbo the way her grandmother taught her, and her grandmother has a cardinal rule.

"My grandmother says, if it's not made with roux, it's gutter water," Crump said.

Hopkins knows what she means. He learned how to make gumbo while a young chef in New Orleans working in the kitchens of Mr. B's Bistro and the Grill Room at the Windsor Court Hotel. He says that's where he learned to tame the "jealous mistress" that is roux, referring to the fact that once the butter starts to bubble and the flour is sifted in, the cook is tied to the stove for the next 30 to 45 minutes.

"You can cook roux quickly, but you pay for it in flavor," Hopkins said. "And with gumbo, what you're doing is building flavor. Sometimes I challenge myself on how dark I can go with my roux. But if you smell char, you have to throw it out and start over. You don't want it bitter."

Once you achieve this step, whatever else is put in a gumbo depends upon who is making it. It's supposed to be a one-pot dish combining whatever the cook has at hand. Tooker says seafood gumbo is considered a "city" version, while chicken and sausage is a "country" staple. There's a "gumbo z'herbes," made almost entirely of leafy greens and served as a Lenten meal. Hopkins makes many versions, from oyster to what he calls a "land" gumbo of veal stock, andouille sausage, tasso ham, chicken thighs, onion, bell pepper and celery. Regardless, he always includes a special ingredient he keeps a secret, a mojo of sorts, though he does hint that a good mojo is some kind of root.

And he swears no amount of flattery, coaxing or cajoling will pull it out of him.

"My children don't even know," he said. "They'll have to find their own."

### **Linton Hopkins' Gumbo YaYa**

8 servings

**Hands on:** 45 minutes

**Total time:** 1 hour, 15 minutes

**This complex, spicy stew is made with tasso, a highly seasoned smoked pork. You can substitute smoked ham or Canadian bacon and add more garlic and spices, or you can order the real thing from Jacob's World Famous Andouille ([www.jacobsandouille.com](http://www.jacobsandouille.com) or 1-877-215-7589). Be careful with roux; do not let it burn or burn you. It is very hot.**

#### **For the roux:**

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, or 1/4 cup butter and 1/4 cup duck fat

1 cup all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon Creole seasoning

1/2 onion, diced small

1/2 green bell pepper, diced small

1 celery rib, diced small

3 cloves garlic, minced

1/2 cup port wine

#### **For the gumbo:**

1 1/2 tablespoons peanut oil

1 pound andouille sausage, sliced on the bias

1/2 pound tasso, diced

1 pound boneless chicken thighs, cut into cubes

1 onion, diced small, divided

1 green bell pepper, diced small, divided

2 celery stalks, small dice,  
divided

6 cloves garlic, minced, divided

1/4 cup chopped parsley (save stems)

1 cup chopped tomato

4 teaspoons Creole seasoning  
2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce  
6 cups chicken stock  
4 cups veal or beef stock  
1 sprig fresh thyme  
6 black peppercorns  
1 bay leaf  
Mojo (your own secret ingredient)  
Tabasco sauce  
Ground black pepper and salt  
Cooked rice  
Minced green onion  
Filé powder

**To make the roux:** In a saucepan, melt the butter (or butter and fat) over medium heat and slowly stir in flour. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until roux is the color of chocolate. Turn off the heat and stir in the Creole seasoning, onion, bell pepper, celery and garlic. Let cook for 3 minutes in hot roux, stirring occasionally. Carefully stir in the port. Set aside.

**To make the gumbo:** Heat the peanut oil in a wide, thick-bottomed pot over high heat. All meats and some of the vegetables will be cooked in this pot. The fat from the sausage, ham and chicken will become reinforced with each step. Keep that fat in the pan.

Sauté the andouille in peanut oil until it is golden brown on one side. Remove and reserve. Add tasso and sauté until golden brown on one side. Remove and reserve. Add chicken thighs and sauté on one side until golden brown. Remove and reserve.

Add half the onion, half the bell pepper, half the celery and half the garlic and cook until the vegetables are soft and beginning to color. Add the parsley, tomato, Creole seasoning, Worcestershire and stocks. Let simmer 10 minutes, then add the reserved meats, the remaining onion, bell pepper, celery and garlic. Bundle the parsley stems, thyme, peppercorns and bay leaf in a piece of cheesecloth and add to the pot. Add your mojo.

Once the soup comes to a boil, rewarm the roux and stir it in a bit at a time. The roux must be warm in order to dissolve lump-free. It will continue to thicken as it cooks.

Let the gumbo cook over medium heat for 30 minutes, making sure to skim off the fat that collects on top of the soup.

Adjust the seasoning with Tabasco and ground black pepper. Add salt to taste, if necessary.

Serve over cooked rice. Garnish with green onion and filé powder.

**Per serving:** 570 calories (percent of calories from fat, 68), 20 grams protein, 24 grams carbohydrates, 2 grams fiber, 41 grams fat (17 grams saturated), 97 milligrams cholesterol, 2,171 milligrams sodium.

## SOUTHERN RECIPE RESTORATION PROJECT

Gumbo recipes

By [ROSALIND BENTLEY](#)

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"When I was taught how to make gumbo by an old Cajun, I was told to add one thing that nobody else knew about, to make it your own," explains chef Linton Hopkins, who worked in several New Orleans restaurant

kitchens before opening Restaurant Eugene in Atlanta. "I adopted the concept of a totem or mojo in order to celebrate the power of gumbo and the uniqueness of my [recipe](#). Each person who tries to make this gumbo needs to add their own mojo. It could be a piece of fennel or sarsaparilla root or a bundle of sage." Whatever it is, it should enhance its flavor — not overwhelm it.

Hopkins, a member of our Saving Southern Food [chefs](#) panel, was inspired by the story of Ezekiel Bray's gumbo — shared by Glen Bray of Columbus — and made a version of it in his kitchen, along with one of his own.



Joey Ivansco/Staff

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

AJC readers gumbo recipe.

He and each of the gumbo cooks featured here all have their special "mojo"; use them as inspiration to find yours.

*You, too, can share an heirloom recipe and honor a loved one for our ongoing Southern Recipe Restoration Project. Go to [ajc.com/food](http://ajc.com/food), under Recipe Restoration Project, click on Submit Yours and fill out the form. Or e-mail it to [savingsouthernfood@ajc.com](mailto:savingsouthernfood@ajc.com). Or mail it to Southern Recipe Restoration Project, c/o Food Editor Susan Puckett, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 72 Marietta St. N.W., Atlanta, GA 30303.*

## Gumbo Z'Herbes

8 servings

**Hands on:** 25-45 minutes

**Total time:** 2 1/2-3 hours

**This is about as close to a vegetarian gumbo as you can get, though some people add a bit of salt pork to the mix. It's adapted from one shared with us by Judy Walker, food editor of the New Orleans Times-Picayune. She tells us that this is considered a Lenten Gumbo, and that it is typically prepared with an odd number of greens, typically seven or more. As the story is told, it's thought that if there are seven greens, you'll make seven new friends.**

**For years Leah Chase, chef of the famed Dooky Chase Restaurant, has what has become a Holy Thursday mainstay in the Crescent City, the Gumbo Z'Herbes Party. This gumbo is brothy, not thick. Add as many greens as you want. Just make sure the number is an odd one.**

**(Tip: You can save on the prep time considerably if you buy the greens already bagged.)**

1/2 pound collard or mustard greens (or both), chopped  
1/2 pound turnip greens (optional), chopped  
1/2 pound spinach, chopped  
1/2 pound green cabbage leaves, cut into strips  
1 small bunch fresh watercress (optional), chopped  
1 small bunch flat-leaf parsley, chopped  
1/4 teaspoon cayenne  
1/4 teaspoon black pepper  
1 bay leaf  
1/4 teaspoon ground thyme  
1/4 teaspoon ground allspice  
1/4 cup vegetable oil  
1/4 cup all-purpose flour  
3 green onions, trimmed and chopped  
1/2 cup chopped onions  
2 cloves garlic, minced

Place the greens, spinach, cabbage, watercress and parsley in a stock pot and cover with 6 cups water. Add the cayenne, black pepper, bay leaf, thyme and allspice. Bring the mixture to a boil, pressing the greens down into the water. Cook about 30 minutes, until the greens are tender.

In a saucepan, combine the oil and flour over medium heat. Stirring constantly, make a roux the color of peanut butter, about 10 minutes. Add the green onions, onions and garlic. Cook, stirring, until the vegetables soften, about 5 minutes. Stir the roux mixture into the greens and simmer, partially covered, for about two hours. Adjust the seasonings to taste.

Serve over rice with French bread.

**Per serving:** 101 calories (percent of calories from fat, 57), 3 grams protein, 9 grams carbohydrates, 3 grams fiber, 7 grams fat (1 gram saturated), no cholesterol, 39 grams sodium.

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### **Ezekiel's Shrimp Gumbo**

8 servings  
Hands on: 30 minutes  
Total time: 1 hour

We tested this recipe as Glen Bray submitted it, with delicious results. Hopkins also made it in his restaurant kitchen — but tried it the way Bray sometimes makes it for his children — by frying the okra and placing it on top. Hopkins lightly flours the slices first, dips them in buttermilk-cornmeal breading, then flash-fries them.

<http://www.ajc.com/living/content/living/food/stories/2007/02/13/021507FDgumbo.html>