Chefs adapt gumbo to the times, locales

BY MEGAN WYATT
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LAFAYETTE - It's just 8 a.m. and Ronnie Brown, affectionately known as "The Gumbo Lady" at Vermilionville Living History and Folk Life Park, is cutting up chicken thighs for La Cuisine de Maman, known as "The Gumbo Lady," and is ready to start serving gumbo in the kitchen.

Although most people have only just eaten breakfast, the kitchen is filling with the taste of gumbo. "I know it's good when I see my bowls come back and they're empty, and I go back and talk to my customers and they say it's the best gumbo they've ever had," Brown said.

Gumbo's beginnings

Arguably Louisiana's most famous dish, gumbo's origins can be traced back to the late 1700s in southern Louisiana. "The word gumbo, people call it 'gumbow,"' Brown said, "sounds sort of like gumbo."

The earliest gumbo did not start with the famed phrase "first you make a roux," but rather with many modern-day area cooks using it, either directly from the African oror as brought to the area by slaves. "In parts of Acadiana, roux tends to be made with whatever seasonal ingredients were available," Brown said. Brown begins making gumbo before 8 a.m. each morning. "The method of cooking a gumbo varies by region," Brown said. "Importantly, where does the roux process begin?"

Brown's gumbo is made in the kitchen of the Louisiana Museum and Folklife Park, the only just eaten breakfast, and gumbo.

"Ibday, gumbo varies from one to another, not the food here is really unique," Laudun said. "An onion is not allowed to be just an onion. The gumbo is an integral part of it."

Everything from seafood (crab, shrimp, crawfish, oysters) to poultry (chicken, duck, quail, pork (tasso, andouille)) has been and continues to be used in gumbo, often in combination. Brown's gumbo, however, is based on a classic Acadiana roux: chicken and andouille gumbo. "Importantly, where does the roux process begin?" asked Laudun. "Down on the Teche, they cook their roux in the pot, then they'll add their seasonings, vegetables, and that stops. Up around Lawtell, people are usually going to brown their chicken and make their roux earlier."

It is no coincidence that jarred roux sold at area grocery stores comes from the northern parts of Acadiana. It can all be traced back to the tradition of making the roux separately from the gumbo, Laudun said. Although gumbo begins with the browning of ingredients, whether it's the vegetables, meat or roux that are browned "You've got a predetermined amount of flavor in every bite," Laudun said. "An onion is not allowed to be just an onion. The gumbo is an integral part of it."

"Chopped onion, celery, and bell pepper are often called the "holy trinity" of gumbo vegetables, but Louisiana said that also varies."

"In parts of southern Louisiana, you might just have onions," said Laudun. "Along the Bayou Teche, you have onions, garlic, bell peppers and celery chopped up."

While cooking her pot of gumbo Tuesday, Brown used fresh seafood in her gumbo. "When cooking her pot of gumbo Tuesday, Brown used fresh vegetables in her gumbo. Celery, onion, parsley remnants lie in the foreground as Ronnie Brown, affectionately known as 'The Gumbo Lady,' cuts up chicken for her gumbo at Vermilionville's restaurant, La Cuisine de Maman, in Lafayette."

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Brown adds jarred庭院, chicken base, file seasoning and kitchen bouquet to the boiling water before adding pieces of raw chicken thigh to cook. "If I make the roux over here, it'll take a lot longer, would take until 11 o'clock," said Brown, who begins making gumbo before 8 a.m. each morning. "Fresh vegetables matter more than a fresh roux, Brown said."

Those looking to make a roux instead of starting from a jar can take Collins' suggestion to avoid burning. "Put it in the oven," Collins said. "That's the most even way to heat the pot because it heats from all the way around, so there's not the risk of burning it."

Mandy Migues, resident Cajun and French teacher at Lafayette High School, has been experimenting with a gluten-free gumbo recipe after recently being diagnosed with gluten sensitivity. "It's a dish everyone eats and enjoys. We enjoy talking about how we make gumbo and what we do differently," said Mandy Migues, resident Cajun and French teacher at Lafayette High School. "It's a dish everyone eats and enjoys. We enjoy talking about how we make gumbo and what we do differently," Migues said.

"The dish is a living, breathing dish," Laudun said. "And as long as it serves a purpose, it will continue to serve its communities in different ways, in its many varieties."