

# The Real Story of Gumbo and Okra

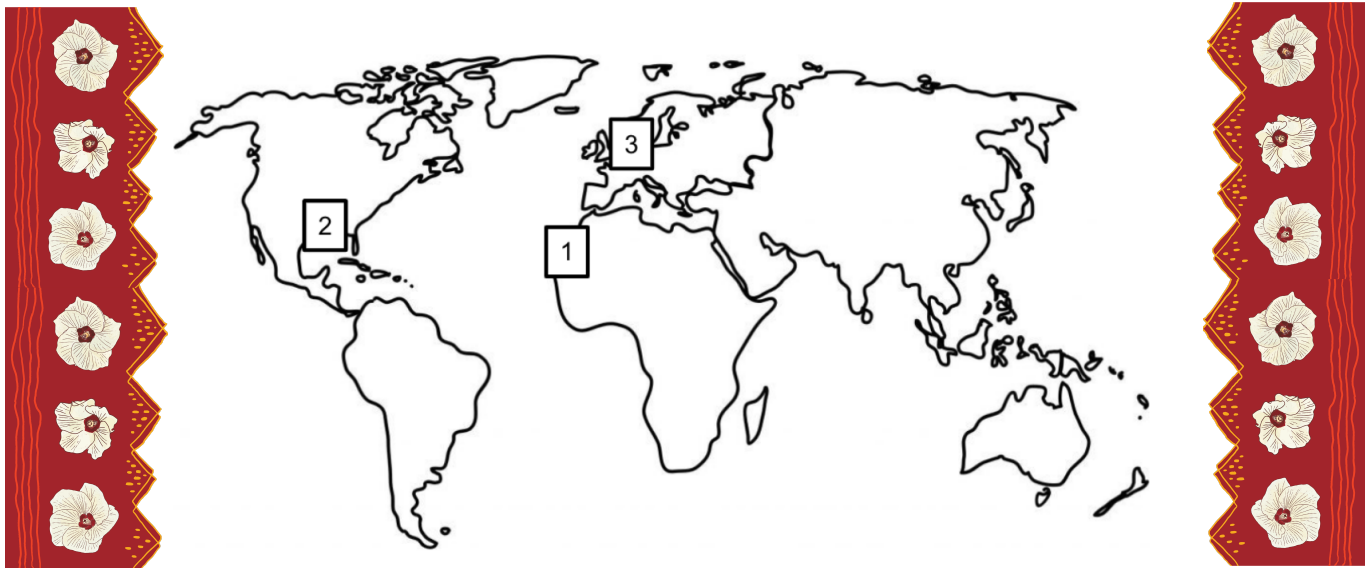
by Robert Moss

(excerpts below, view full article [here](#))



You can learn a lot about the history of Southern food by studying a bowl of gumbo. The very name conjures up a rich array of ingredients coming together in a single pot and melding into something rich and delicious. It represents the intersection of three cultures—European, Native American, and West African—that created what we know today as Southern cuisine.

In the case of gumbo, though, we really need to phrase it as the intersection of African, Native American, and European cultures, for that ordering more accurately captures the sequence in which the dish unfolded.



These days, gumbo is closely associated with Louisiana and for good reason. But it actually has a much broader regional footprint. It's a prime example of how West African foodways took root in the Southern colonies and, over time, gave birth to some of the region's most iconic dishes.

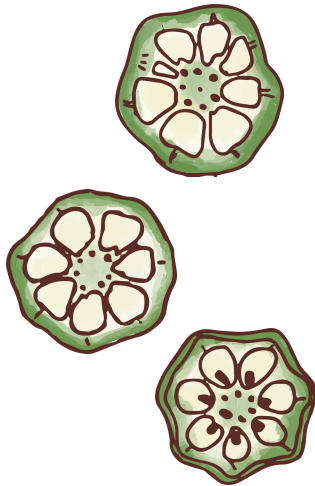
## The Bouillabaisse

At its most basic, what we call gumbo today is a savory stew made with a variety of meats or shellfish combined with an array of vegetables and herbs. From there, all bets are off. Gumbo can be as thin as soup or as thick as gravy. The proteins might be chicken and crab or sausage and shrimp. It is often repeated that gumbo is a variation of bouillabaisse, the classic fish stew from Provence. This notion is repeated everywhere but it's also completely wrong.

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Yes, bouillabaisse is French, and a lot of French people migrated to Louisiana, where they ended up eating gumbo. But the two dishes are made in wholly different ways. So how did that connection come to be made in the first place? Lolis Eric Elie has a few ideas. He has also been one of the strongest voices decrying the whitewashing of gumbo.



He methodically blasted food writers' long-standing habit of ignoring the contributions of black cooks to Louisiana's cuisine. Instead, he argued, those writers twist and bend to invent connections to every European food culture from Spain to New England—including crediting French elites with the first gumbo.

"Until relatively recently, we never studied the African influence on American culture," Elie says. "The assumption really was that the Europeans went and got these people who were capable of being taught things, but the people had nothing to contribute, so the assumption was the only contribution was labor."

In reality, no one needed to teach Africans how to cook gumbo. They brought its base ingredient with them to the New World and they cooked it using techniques that had been handed down from one generation to the next. Far from being a food tradition unique to Louisiana, gumbo is instead an important part of the larger fabric of African-based foodways in the South as a whole.

## Ki Ngombo

So if not bouillabaisse, where did gumbo come from? The answer can be found in its very name. In several West African languages, the word for okra is ki ngombo, or, in its shortened form, gombo." Early on, the word was frequently used alongside "okra" by English writers. In the 1840s, when okra was just starting to

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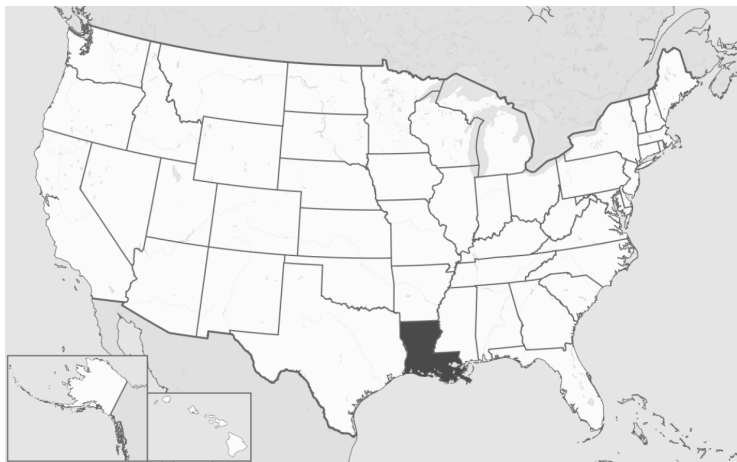
be grown widely outside the coastal South, newspaper ads commonly offered seeds for "Okra or Gombo." "Gombo" is still the French word for okra today.

The roots of gumbo do run deep in Louisiana. Enslaved Africans were brought to the French colony in large numbers starting in 1719, and by 1721 more than half the residents of New Orleans were African. The first known reference to gumbo as a dish was uncovered by historian Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, who found a handwritten transcription of the interrogation of a 50-year-old slave named Comba in New Orleans in 1764.

## A New Orleans Icon

By the late 1830s, New Orleans newspapers were already incorporating gumbo into jokes and aphorisms as a sort of well-loved local dish. In 1838, the Times-Picayune commented, "Secret of Health—Live Light and eat plenty of gumbo."

Though well entrenched in Louisiana, gumbo was by no means a dish unique to that region. Indeed, during the colonial era and the early 19th century, similar okra-based stews and soups could be found anywhere a large number of enslaved Africans and their descendants lived—and, in fact, those dishes can still be found there today.



## Beyond Louisiana Gumbo

So here we are, with a West African dish having taken firm root in the American South, most deeply in Louisiana but with a significant footprint in other coastal areas, too. When considering gumbo's broader impact on the

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South, it helps to look to regions beyond Louisiana, such as the coastal Lowcountry of South Carolina.



BJ Dennis is a personal chef and caterer in Charleston, South Carolina, and he specializes in Gullah Geechee cuisine. A lot of okra-based dishes in Gullah Geechee cuisine likely have a direct link to 19th century "gombo." Many involve a thick tomato-based sauce in which meat or seafood are cooked along with onions, spices, and, of course, okra. There are plenty of recipes for "okra and tomatoes" and "shrimp and okra", too, that are almost identical to the more basic gumbo recipes being published in the 1820s and 1830s.

"Okra was the main staple vegetable in the summertime," Dennis says, "It's one of the few that thrives because it's so hot." Fortuitously, okra is in season at the same time as shrimp, which is a natural flavor match.

It has taken culinary historians and food writers far too long to recognize the central role that African American cooks played in creating what we know today as Southern cuisine. But those cooks were there from the very beginning, and their contributions were foundational, providing essential ingredients, techniques, and the very sensibility that defines Southern cooking. There's no better way to taste that legacy than with a good bowl of gumbo, and preferably one made with fresh-picked okra.



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