

# Down to the Roots: Historical Insights on Okra



## Origin Story

Okra was first discovered and cultivated in Northeastern Africa. The earliest written record of okra came from the Spanish-Arab scientist, Abul-Abbas al-Nebati, who wrote about the plant while traveling through Egypt.

al-Nebati described okra as a fruiting vegetable containing edible seed pods that were often eaten in Egyptian cuisine.

Once cultivated, okra flourished in the Middle East and North Africa, where even the seeds were cooked, toasted, ground, and served as an alternative to coffee. Okra spread to other areas of the Eastern world through trade caravans that traveled thousands of miles to Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, via the Sahara desert or the Red Sea.



Eventually, there was a diversity of okra plant varieties found in West Africa, Northern India, Pakistan, Southern China and other parts of Southeast Asia that became known as the wild relatives of the cultivated okra from the Middle East.

In various parts of the ancient world, okra was a staple dish. In addition to being used for food, okra has had other important uses, as well: medicinal uses (made into a paste to soothe or reduce inflammation); textile (making rope and cloth from the fibers of the plant); and religious uses (used to make materials for religious practices).



# Okra in the United States

With the advent of the African slave trade during the 15-16th centuries, okra was brought to the other side of the globe - North and South America. As the slave trade became more prominent in the United States, it is believed that okra came through ports, such as Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, as these were big business hubs for the purchasing of slaves.

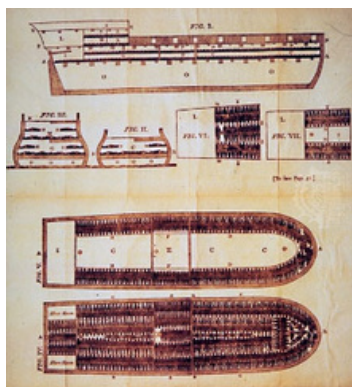
Native foods of the enslaved populations, such as okra, were used in an attempt to 'subdue' the slaves. This means that slave traders allowed the people they kidnapped and forced into captivity to bring along their native foods to ensure that they were well-fed on the perilous 'Middle Passage' journey, using it as a means of control and appeasement.

Creole legends also suggest that African slaves would braid rice, okra, and millet seeds into their hair in order to preserve their cultural roots in the face of their uncertain futures.

Enslaved communities began to make okra in their own meals, as well as those of their masters. It became an important component of their diets because it was easy to grow in the South, and it provided extra sustenance when slave owners reduced their allotted food.

Big plantation owners like Thomas Jefferson made their slaves grow a lot of okra and started to include it in national seed catalogs in the early 1800s.

Okra recipes were first incorporated in cookbooks in 1824. "The Virginia Housewife" by Mary Randolph included recipes that were created by her enslaved black cooks.



## The Story of Phoebe's Kitchen from the book "Dwelling Places":

Phoebe was an enslaved woman on the Montevideo plantation near Savannah, GA, who was responsible for all of the cooking around the house. She was known far and wide for her incredible cooking techniques, organizational skills, and meticulously created meals. One of her most famous dishes among the plantation owners and her own family was ochingombo stew, which is named after the Umbundu word for "pod". Slaves on the Montevideo plantation would grow and harvest okra, and then Phoebe would make the soup by putting the pods into a pot of water with a piece of pork, some tomatoes and cayenne peppers to cook slowly throughout the day. Phoebe's work and reputation had a direct impact on the well-being, safety and comfort of her family.