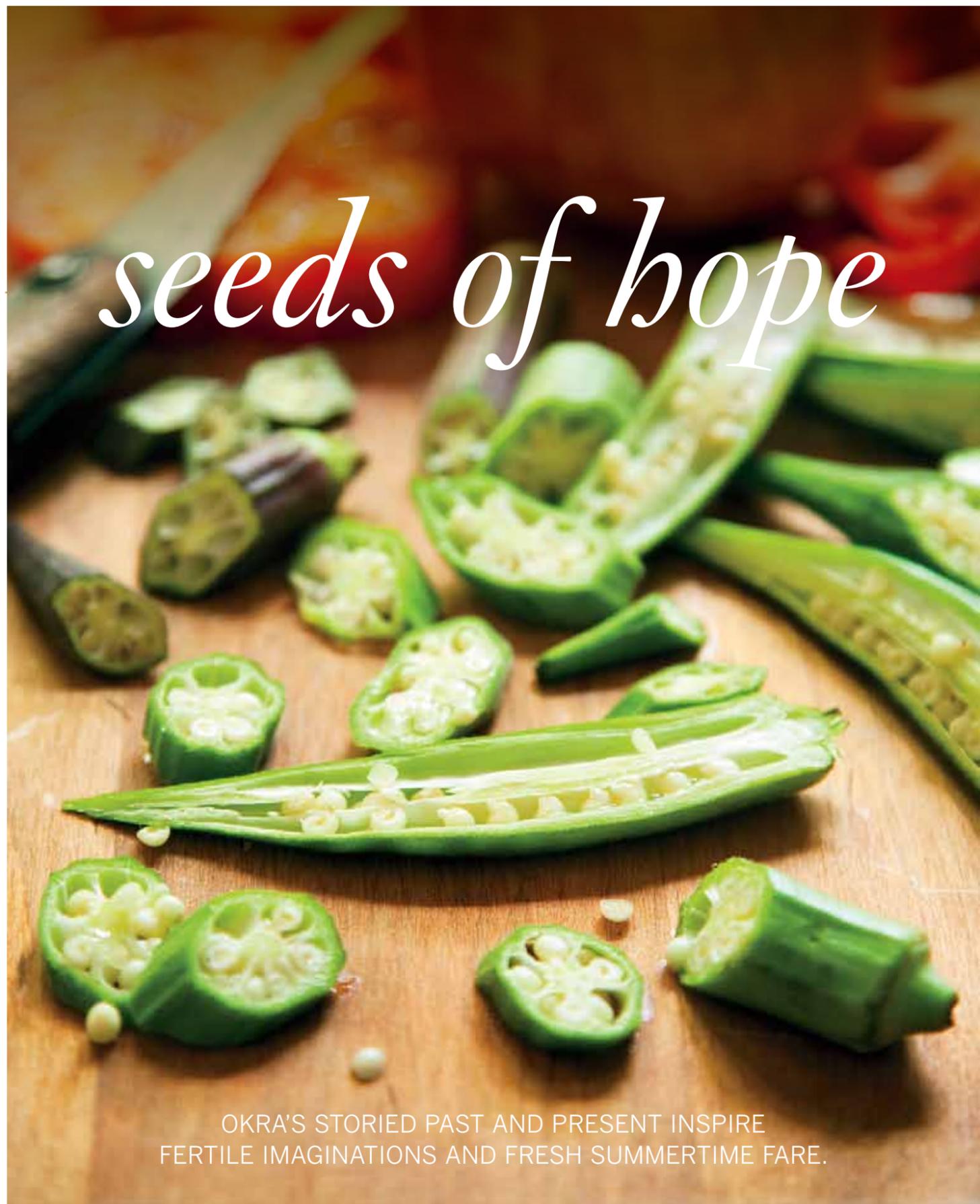


# seeds of hope



OKRA'S STORIED PAST AND PRESENT INSPIRE FERTILE IMAGINATIONS AND FRESH SUMMERTIME FARE.



**d**espite its occasional flowery appearance, the short, stout, fuzzy-faced okra pod has a captivatingly seedy side. And it's been on some remarkable journeys.

Although its origins are unclear, okra has been cultivated as a food crop in Africa for many centuries. Its arrival in North America involves a myth that's been perpetuated through generations: that okra seeds were brought to America after being tucked in the hair, or the ear, of an African slave hoping to sustain himself after reaching his uncertain destination. This story was most prominently featured in Waverly Root and Richard De Rochemont's food history text, *Eating in America* (Morrow, 1976).

Texas-based food writer Robb Walsh questions that story in the essay "Pods of the Gods." "I tried to imagine myself a captive West African being led away in irons by men with whips and guns. How would I react? Seething with anger, weeping with sorrow, and screaming in rebellion all came to mind," he writes. "Sticking some okra seeds in my hair or ear did not."

Walsh turned to California State University-Fullerton geography professor and ethnobiologist Robert Voeks, whose decades of research lead him to believe that okra arrived here in the early 18th century by way of Portuguese slave traders "who knew it made good business sense to keep the slaves healthy."

Culinary historian Jessica B. Harris, an expert on African and Caribbean cuisines, offers a similar explanation. "With the exception of necklaces and amulets, the beads of which have been found in archaeological digs on this side of the Atlantic, most slaves arrived with no belongings and had little idea of their fate," she writes in her award-winning book, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (Bloomsbury, 2012). "The arrival of African foodstuffs in this hemisphere during the period of the Transatlantic Slave Trade is the result of a more brutal reality. The economics of slavery were such that slavers needed to feed slaves a diet on which they would survive."

Fortunately, the African slaves who survived the deplorable conditions did so with help from okra, a plant thought to have originated in Ethiopia (though some say India or Southeast Asia).

**Above, from left:** Okra begins as a lovely (and edible) hibiscuslike flower; mature pods are rinsed clean, then placed in a jar for pickling. **Opposite:** Okra is sliced and prepared for cooking.

BY DENISE GEE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT M. PEACOCK

So where did this okra-seed-in-the-hair-or-ear story get its start? Think voodoo, or something akin to it: the Candomblé religion. Originating in West Africa with the Yoruba people (and later thriving in Brazil), one Candomblé ceremony involves making *caruru*, an okra stew, to please the twin gods of fertility and procreation. When the religion began to be practiced in New Orleans and elsewhere, Voeks says, okra seeds did travel to America in the hands of Africans, but in this case, freed ones “who actually returned to Africa and shipped the missing magical ingredients of their religions back to their friends and families.”

Besides okra’s nutritional and religious qualities, the vegetable literally oozes with charm. Its “slime factor,” technically called mucilage, made it a prized thickening agent and “meaty” vegetable for the

gumbos born in early-19th-century New Orleans. How fitting that the West African Bantu word for okra is *quingombo*, pronounced like “in-gumbo.”

Decidedly, one person’s gooey goodness is another’s “vegetable with the runny nose.” To avoid okra ooze, Southerners have learned to cook it quickly by flash-frying it, sautéing it (a.k.a. smothering it, most often with tomatoes), pickling it, and more recently, roasting or grilling it whole.

“The trick is to keep okra’s appearance and flavor intact,” notes holistic soul food restaurateur Alluette Jones-Small of Charleston, South Carolina. The Okra Fried Rice at her vegetable-centric Alluette’s Café does just that, and divinely so. In South Carolina Lowcountry, rice and okra have gone together since time immemorial in the rice pilaf dish “pilau” (pronounced “per-loo” or “per-low”). [continued on page 54]

For Kirk Kirksey’s okra tips and Joy’s pickled okra recipe, go to [OrganicGardening.com/okra](http://OrganicGardening.com/okra) or see our iPad edition.

## the seed saver



## better-than-OK okra



- Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) is a flowering plant in the mallow family. Hibiscus and hollyhocks are in the same family (hence the similar blooms), as well as cotton and cacao.
- Okra season is primarily May through September.
- Some liken okra’s earthy flavor to that of eggplant.
- Harvest or select okra when the pods are 2 to 3 inches long—about the size of a lady’s finger, which is one of its common names. Pods should be rich emerald green or claret red with a velvety covering of peach-style fuzz.
- Bruises or marks on okra can affect its texture and flavor. Shriveled okra isn’t worth a second thought.
- The bigger the okra pod, the tougher it is—which is fine if you’re growing them to dry and collect seeds for next year’s planting.
- Store unwashed okra in a paper bag in your refrigerator’s crisper. Eat it within 2 to 3 days.
- To freeze young, tender okra, slice off the tips, being careful not to expose any seeds. Blanch it by boiling for 3 minutes, then submerging in ice water for 5 minutes. Drain well and pat dry. Freeze whole or in slices. In an airtight freezer bag, the okra will last for about 8 months in the freezer. (Another option is to slice the blanched okra and coat it with seasoned cornmeal before freezing.)
- Okra is high in fiber and rich in vitamins A, C, and K, as well as some B vitamins and antioxidants. It’s also a good source of potassium and calcium.
- Adding a teaspoon of lime juice, lemon juice, or white vinegar to your okra dish can help reduce sliminess. (Acidic tomatoes can serve the same purpose.)
- Before frying okra, slice it and let it sit at room temperature for about 1 hour. This will help it better absorb a good coating.
- To help keep its color and texture sprightly, add okra slices to a long-cooking dish like gumbo only toward the last 15 minutes of cooking.
- Adding salt toward the end of cooking time will help lessen okra’s viscosity.
- Don’t cover okra while cooking it, as trapped moisture encourages gelatinousness. —D.G.

I was introduced to one of the latest chapters in the storied life of okra one sweltering late-summer afternoon at the home of Kirk Kirksey (above left, with his wife, Joy). His vibrant garden is the envy of his neighbors, of which I am one.

While sipping a Pimm’s Cup cocktail with cucumber-wedge stirrer, I met the star of our forthcoming evening meal, ‘Okra 56’. Kirk’s garden was positively brimming with it, so he and Joy were clearing a bumper crop by serving spicy pickled okra and fried okra appetizers before a main course of grilled, garlic-tinged okra, thick slices of beefy tomatoes, and smoky Kreuz Market sausage.

Since Kirk acquired this rare dwarf variety of okra from Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa, his enthusiasm for the heirloom veggie has bordered on obsession. That’s not just because he babied to fruition the 25-or-so seeds he received, but also because the seeds have taken to the soil like nobody’s business.

Toughing out near-drought conditions and an unfriendly North Texas soil, the okra is one of his garden’s healthiest and mightiest plants—so much so that Kirk has renamed it ‘Winnetka Wonder’ after his historic neighborhood, Winnetka Heights.

“Besides, who wants to put something called ‘Okra 56’ in their gumbo?” Kirk says. No arguments there.

Halfway through the meal, though, came the big reveal—something Kirk had been itching to tell me. (Or maybe it was just his okra’s itch-inducing leaves.)

“You’re originally from Natchez, Mississippi,” he said. Sensing my delight, Kirk thumbed through a 2013 Seed Savers Exchange catalog that was three times the size of Natchez’ phone book. In it he found the entry for ‘Okra 56’, which notes: “Dorothy Smith of Rockdale, TX donated this variety to SSE in the early 1990s. Dorothy received seed from Eunice L. Montgomery of Natchez, MS in 1983. It was grown by the family of Eunice’s friend’s mother-in-law since around the late 1860’s.”

Growing up to 4 feet tall, and planted about 18 inches apart, ‘Winnetka Wonder’ produces an impressive canopy of green in our otherwise scorched-earth Texas environs. “That really says something about its staying power, especially in the dog days of summer,” Kirk says. “If it can thrive here, imagine what it could do in places less hostile to gardeners.”

Hoping to keep the okra from fizzling out, Kirk has formed the “Winnetka Wonder Dwarf Okra Rescue Initiative,” a one-man operation committed to keeping it from becoming extinct. “If I have enough seeds, I’ll share them with anyone committed to keeping this okra’s legacy alive,” Kirk says. (Interested parties can find him at [kirkkirksey.com](http://kirkkirksey.com).) There’s one hitch: “They just have to pinky-swear to plant them, save some seeds from their own harvest, and pass them on to others.”

Kirk says he’ll send planting instructions as well as “a top-secret technique” for getting the best germination rate. (Hint: “Let’s just say it involves a toenail clipper.”) —D.G.

[continued from page 52] Summertime cooks in the South appreciate the fact that fast-cooking okra doesn't heat up a kitchen as much as gumbo. Gumbo is favored more during cooler temperatures—say, football season, when the unofficial mascot of Mississippi's Delta State University, the Gumby-esque Fighting Okra, can be seen sporting boxing gloves and a snarl.

The upshot of okra is that it's a survivor, as culinary historians will confirm and trustees of its future will attest. And its story will continue to be told—perhaps even sung. To wit: humorist Roy Blount Jr.'s "Song to Okra":

*It may be poor for eating chips with,  
It may be hard to come to grips with,  
But okra's such a wholesome food  
It straightens out your attitude.*

The song, and this story, close thusly:

*You can have strip pokra.  
Give me a nice girl and a dish of okra.*



## Fried Okra with a Kick

When frying okra pods whole, I usually soak them in buttermilk (about 1½ cups to 1 cup seasoned cornmeal) to give their coating a fighting chance of hanging on. For quick-frying sliced okra, the natural sticking power of the okra will help keep the meal on board, especially if you've let them sit out for about an hour. This crispy, spicy version shared by Joy Kirksey makes for excellent snacks and delightful salad croutons.

**2 pounds fresh okra**  
(about 4 cups sliced)  
**2 cups stone-ground yellow cornmeal**  
or **corn flour** (may substitute **1 cup**  
**cornmeal and 1 cup all-purpose flour**)\*  
**½ teaspoon sea or kosher salt**  
**½ teaspoon black pepper**  
**½ teaspoon cayenne pepper**  
(plus more to taste, optional)  
**5 cups peanut oil**

**1.** Rinse the whole okra pods under cold water, drain, pat dry, trim tops, and cut into ¼-inch pieces on the bias. Set aside, salt lightly, and let stand at room temperature for at least 20 minutes. The salt will bring out the "goo" in the okra, allowing the cornmeal to adhere even better—making the crust just a bit crispier.

**2.** Place the cornmeal, ½ teaspoon salt, black pepper, and cayenne into a resealable zip-top plastic bag. Add the okra and shake to coat thoroughly. Return

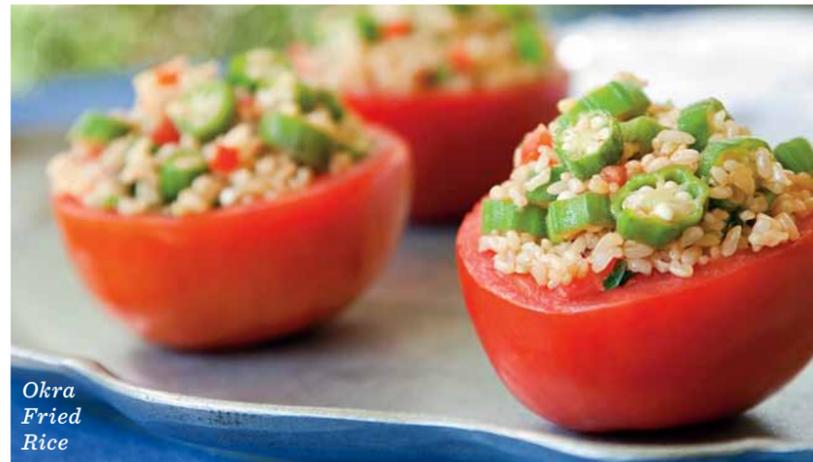
the okra to a dry colander and shake off excess cornmeal.

**3.** Add enough peanut oil to a 12-inch stainless steel sauté pan to completely cover the bottom of the pan. Place over medium-high heat and bring the oil to 375°F. Add the okra and fry until golden brown, turning once, approximately 5 minutes.

**4.** Remove the okra from the pan with a slotted spoon or spatula to paper towels to drain. Season with more salt, if desired, and allow to cool for 1 to 2 minutes before serving.

• *Makes 6 to 8 servings*

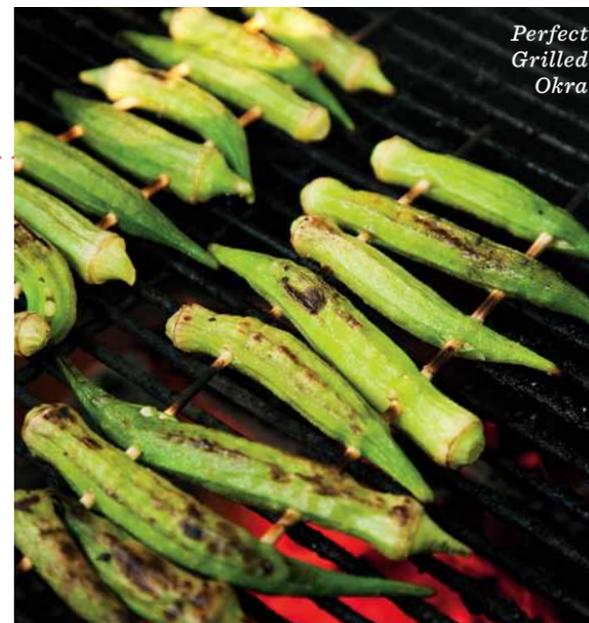
*\*Texans love Lamb's Stone Ground Cornmeal, a gluten-free, preservative-free yellow meal made in Converse, Texas, since 1967. It's grown with locally harvested non-GMO corn and ground in stone burr mills.*



Okra Fried Rice



Fried Okra with a Kick



Perfect Grilled Okra



Skillet Okra, Tomatoes, and Shrimp

## Okra Fried Rice

This recipe is a great use for leftover rice and a bounty of okra. It's adapted from one by chef Alluette Jones-Small, owner of Alluette's Café in Charleston, South Carolina. Eat as a side dish or use to stuff tomato halves.

**About 1 cup uncooked brown or white basmati rice** (enough to yield **4 cups** cooked)  
**2 teaspoons olive oil**  
**1 pound okra** (about **4 cups**), stemmed and sliced into ¼-inch-thick pieces  
**½ cup chopped red bell pepper**  
**½ to ½ cup chopped sweet onion**  
**2 tablespoons minced sweet basil**  
**½ teaspoon salt**  
**¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper** (or to taste)  
**2 tablespoons wheat-free tamari sauce**  
**Optional: 4 large tomatoes, halved and scooped; chopped pulp** (about **1 cup**) reserved to mix in rice

**1.** Cook the rice according to package directions.

**2.** Heat a skillet to medium. Add the olive oil, okra, bell pepper, sweet onion, basil, salt, and cayenne pepper. Sauté until crisp-tender (3 to 5 minutes).

**3.** Pour into a large bowl. Gently fold in the cooked rice and tamari sauce and carefully blend. Serve warm or at room temperature. If desired, stir in reserved chopped tomato and serve in tomato cups.

• *Makes 8 servings*

## Perfect Grilled Okra

Brush okra pods with olive oil and season them with garlic-herb-flavored salt. To hold them in place on the grill, thread them at top and bottom with two kabob skewers that have been soaked in water at least 30 minutes. Grill the okra on an oiled grill for 3 to 4 minutes on each side and enjoy.

## Skillet Okra, Tomatoes, and Shrimp

Bacon drippings give this dish a smoky depth of Southern flavor, but it's fine to keep it on the lighter side with peanut oil. Serve it over cooked rice, grilled or pan-fried polenta slices, or a bed of grits.

**1 tablespoon bacon drippings** (from about 2 slices) or **peanut oil**  
**1 small sweet onion, chopped**  
**2 cloves garlic, minced**  
**1 pound fresh okra, destemmed and sliced lengthwise** (about **2 cups**)  
**2 cups fresh chopped tomatoes, peeled, juices retained; or 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, undrained**  
**½ teaspoon sea or kosher salt, or to taste**  
**¼ teaspoon of freshly cracked black pepper, or to taste**  
**½ teaspoon low-sodium Cajun or Creole seasoning, or to taste** (omit if using preseasoned canned tomatoes)  
**1 teaspoon brown or granulated sugar, or to taste** (optional to offset tartness)  
**1 pound large (31–35 count) fresh shrimp, peeled and deveined**

**1.** Heat the drippings or oil in a large heavy skillet over medium-high heat.

**2.** Reduce the heat to medium and add the onion, cooking about 3 minutes until beginning to brown and soften. Add the garlic and sliced okra and stir, turning occasionally, for about 5 minutes. Add more oil if necessary.

**3.** Stir in the tomatoes, salt, pepper, Cajun or Creole seasoning, and sugar. Let the mixture simmer for 7 minutes. Add the shrimp and cook for another 5 to 7 minutes, stirring until the shrimp are just-pink. Adjust seasonings to taste and, if desired, stir in cooked, crumbled bacon. Serve immediately.

• *Makes 4 servings*



## IPAD CONTENT ONLY

### Joy Kirksey's Pickled Okra

*Pickled okra makes a nice condiment for cocktail hour—especially when skewered with olives and served with bloody Marys. It also makes a lovely, edible gift, and with its lemon accents, it's a sunny reminder of the summer harvest. For this recipe, you will need 4 pint-size (16-ounce) wide-mouth canning jars, with lids and screw bands, plus a jar lifter and a large pot with a canning rack for canning (at least 16 quarts).*

- 1 to 1½ pounds fresh okra (3½ to 4 inches long)**
- 2 cups cider vinegar (5 percent acidity)**
- 2 cups water**
- 3 tablespoons kosher or sea salt**
- 1 tablespoon evaporated cane juice or sugar**
- 4 lemon slices, ¼ inch thick**
- 4 large garlic cloves, peeled**

PICKLING SPICES (May substitute 4 tablespoons of premade/commercially made pickling spices)

- 2 tablespoons mustard seeds**
- 1 tablespoon coriander seeds**
- 1 tablespoon red pepper flakes**
- 1 teaspoon fennel seeds**
- 1 teaspoon celery seeds**
- 1 teaspoon mixed peppercorns**

- 1.** Soak the okra in cool water for 15 minutes; drain and pat dry just before pickling. (This will help keep them crisp.)
- 2.** Fill the canner halfway with water, bring to a boil, then reduce to simmer. Meanwhile, place the jars in a large stockpot with water to cover, bring to a boil, and simmer about 10 minutes. Place the bands and lids in a large saucepan with water to cover, bring to a boil, and simmer (also about 10 minutes). Remove the hot jars 1 at a time using the jar lifter, emptying the water from the jars. Place the hot, sterilized jars on a tea towel placed on a cutting board or counter. (The towel will help absorb the heat and prevent the jars from cracking after meeting a cold counter surface.)
- 3.** In a medium saucepan, combine the vinegar, water, salt, and sugar. Bring to a boil and cook, stirring occasionally, until the salt and sugar are completely dissolved. Reduce heat and keep warm.

- 4.** Add the pickling spices to a small bowl and stir to combine. Set aside.
- 5.** To the bottom of each jar, add one lemon slice, 1 tablespoon of pickling spices, and one clove of peeled garlic.
- 6.** Pack the okra into the jars, alternating stem-side-up and stem-side-down for the best fit. The top of the okra should be at least ½ inch from the jar rim.
- 7.** Pour the hot vinegar mixture over the okra, filling jars to ¼ inch from the rim. Use a skewer or thin knife to eliminate any visible air bubbles. (Note: If for some reason you don't have enough pickling liquid for all the jars, just add equal amounts of cider vinegar and water. You don't need to heat it first, since the liquid will boil in the hot water bath.)
- 8.** Wipe the jar rims; cover at once with metal lids, and screw on bands to be well fitting but not super-tight. Place the jars in the canning rack and lower into the simmering water in the canner. Add additional boiling water as needed to cover by 1 to 2 inches. Bring the water to a rolling boil; boil 15 minutes. Remove from heat. Cool the jars in the canner for 5 minutes. Transfer the jars to a cutting board or tea-towel-covered countertop. Cool for 12 to 24 hours.
- 9.** Test the seals on the jars by pressing the center of each lid. If the lids do not pop, the jars are properly sealed. If any jars do not seal, store them in the refrigerator. Opened jars should last 1 to 2 months in the refrigerator.
- 10.** Store in a cool, dry place at room temperature up to 1 year

● *Makes 4 pints*

### Okra Palooza

Dallas gets so jazzed about its okra that each June it hosts Okra Palooza, where guest chefs and home cooks compete to be the Okra Palooza champion. Attendees pay a pittance to vote on the edible offerings while getting to throw down a couple of beers or soft drinks (kids are welcome, too) and dance to live music. It all goes to benefit the Promise of Peace Community Garden in East Dallas. For more information, visit [promiseofpeace.us](http://promiseofpeace.us).