

SMOTHERED OKRA AND SHRIMP

Last weekend at the Sutter Creek Farmers Market I noticed some nice looking okra for sale. For some of you, okra is that strange vegetable that gets all slimy. But that's only if you don't cook it properly. I love okra, and when paired with Virginia Manners' delicious heirloom tomatoes, it makes a truly wonderful Cajun dish.

I looked in my Louisiana cookbooks for inspiration, checking out books by such Cajun cooks as Paul Prudhomme, Justin Wilson, and Emeril Lagasse. And, as is often the case, I ended up taking a bit from one and something from the other, to make my own version of smothered okra and shrimp. Here's how to do it. Once again, all the ingredients are approximations.

Preheat your oven to 300 degrees. Take a pound and a half or so of fresh okra, rinse and drain, trim the stems off, and slice the okra into about ½ inch-long pieces. Put the cut up okra into a covered casserole or stew pot, being careful not to use cast iron as cast iron will turn the okra black. Add a large peeled and chopped onion, several cloves of peeled and finely minced or pressed garlic, about a cup and a half of chopped celery, and a couple of large heirloom tomatoes that you've cored and squeezed the seeds out of. (You want about two cups of chopped tomatoes, and although the cookbooks tell you to peel the tomatoes, I don't bother to.)

I also added a couple of stemmed and cored red jalapeno peppers, about ¾ teaspoon of dried thyme, a teaspoon of salt, and about ½ teaspoon of freshly ground black pepper. Because I like things spicy, I also added several good shakes of liquid hot pepper seasoning, plus a sprinkle of garlic powder and some onion powder. Finally, I shoved a couple of bay leaves into the vegetables, and poured about 1/3 cup of olive oil over it all. Then put the lid on the pan and put it in your preheated 300 degree oven for about 45 minutes. After 45 minutes, take it out and stir, and put it back in the oven for another 45 minutes or so. You want it all to cook down and the okra to not be slimy. Then stir in about a pound of peeled shrimp and cook for another 10 to 15 minutes or so, until the shrimp are fully cooked. I used the precooked shrimp from the supermarket, pulled their tails off, stirred them in and stuck it back in the oven for 10 minutes. It came out just fine. Check for salt, and serve over some steamed rice, passing the hot sauce on the side. Leftovers are great served over cornbread too.

Okra also makes great pickles. Take about a pound of okra, rinse it off, and slice it in half lengthwise. In a colander, toss the okra with about 3 tablespoons of salt. I use kosher salt for most things in my kitchen, and it works just fine for this. Let the salted okra drain in the sink for an hour or even longer.

Peel and slice a couple of medium onions—you'll want about 2 cups worth, more or less. Then, in a small saucepan, mix together 2 cups water, 3 cups distilled white vinegar, 2 tablespoons of sugar, another three tablespoons of salt, 2 bay leaves, ½ a teaspoon of cayenne pepper or to taste, and a teaspoon of brown or yellow mustard seeds. Over medium heat, bring to the boil, stirring to dissolve the salt and sugar. Add the couple of cups of sliced onions and cook for another minute or so, until the onions are slightly soft.

Rinse the okra in cool water to remove the salt and any slime that has accumulated. Put the okra in a large glass or plastic bowl and pour the boiling brine mixture over the okra and stir. Cover with a clean dishtowel and let it cool to room temperature. Put the pickled okra in a glass jar and cover and refrigerate for at least 6 hours or overnight before using. The pickled okra can be stored in airtight containers in the refrigerator for up to a month. It's delicious in salads, in a Bloody Mary, on sandwiches, or any time you feel like a pickle. Don't worry if you haven't been able to write down these recipes—they're available on the Hometown Radio website. Simply go to www.htradio.net and click on the link to the Hometown Kitchen.

The south Asians also make delicious okra curries, but that's another broadcast. So for now, don't pass up the okra at the Farmers Market. It's a delicious part of our southern heritage. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.