

July Spice Club:

Filé

Powder



Filé powder might be a mystery to some folks in the Northeastern U.S., but the dried and powdered leaves of the sassafras tree is a standby in Louisianan Creole gumbos. Also called gumbo filé, its flavor is reminiscent of savory and thyme, and its scent is described in the sweet children’s book Yumbo Gumbo as “mint and fruit and freshly cut wood.” Gumbo recipes utilize filé powder and/or okra as necessary thickening agents.

“Filé” as a word has an intriguing etymologic and cultural background reflective of the melting pot of the South. Choctaw Native Americans of the American South were the first people to utilize filé as a seasoning. From there, perhaps the French initiated the use of the word “filé” for this seasoning, as they were a colonizing force in Louisiana during the 17th century, but the word may also have come from the Central Bantu dialect spoken by enslaved African peoples trafficked to the region.

We’re featuring two gumbo recipes this month to highlight the dish’s inherent variety. Sprinkle a conservative amount of filé powder into your gumbo pot at the end of cook time to avoid boiling. Other gumbo tips: always use a wooden spoon for your roux for ease of scraping. Sausage (like andouille) is usually included because it complements other protein components well. And serve your gumbo with rice, either as a bed or accent element in the bowl. Bon appétit!

Creole Filé Gumbo Recipe

Lil' Dizzy's Café, as profiled on ExploreLouisiana.com

Prep: 30 mins. | Cook: 1 hr. 30 mins. | Serves: 10-12

“Seasoning ham is leftover baked ham chopped into ¼” pieces. You may substitute your favorite breakfast sausage links for hot sausage; just make sure it isn’t a variety that includes sweeteners. Gumbo crabs are readily found in the freezer section of Louisiana supermarkets; they’re the leftover crab after the jumbo lump meat has been removed from the body of the crab. To substitute, use 1 qt. boxed seafood stock per quart of water used [so 2.5 qts. total for this recipe as written].”

1 ¼ lbs. seasoning ham	½ green bell pepper, chopped
1 ¼ lbs. smoked sausage	2 tsp. thyme leaves
1 ½ lbs. chicken pieces	5 bay leaves
½ lb. hot sausage	⅔ cup vegetable oil
1 ½ lbs. peeled shrimp	4-5 Tbsp. flour
6-8 gumbo crabs	10 cups water
1 dozen oysters	Filé powder
2 cups chopped onion	Salt and pepper
¼ cup chopped garlic	Hot cooked rice, for serving
3 green onions, chopped	

Cube ham and slice sausages. Heat oil in an 8-10 quart pot. Add ham to brown.

Add onions and cook until tender. Add chicken and sausages and brown. Add shrimp and other seasonings and cook 5 minutes.

Sprinkle flour over meats and seasonings and stir well.

Add water and bring to a simmer. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Add gumbo crabs [or the substituted seafood stock] and cook on medium-low fire about 45 minutes. Add oysters and cook 5 minutes. Turn off heat.

Add filé powder (to taste) and stir in gumbo. Serve over cooked rice.

Five-Generation Seafood Gumbo

Catherine Robertson, Food52

Prep: 30 mins. | Cook: 1 hr. 30 mins. | Makes: 2 gallons

3-4 large chicken backs	8-10 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 dozen large crabs	1 ½ cups shortening (or ½ bacon grease, ½ Crisco)
1 pouch crab boil mix	2 cups all-purpose flour, or as needed
1 Tbsp. salt and pepper	3 Tbsp. granulated sugar
6 oz. tomato paste	4 lbs. raw shrimp, peeled, more to taste
1 pint canned chopped tomatoes	1 pint shucked oysters
2 medium onions, diced	1 pint picked, cooked crab meat
2 medium green peppers, diced	2 teaspoons gumbo filé powder
2 cups celery stalks, diced	
4 cups chopped okra, more to taste	

Put the chicken backs and crabs in a large stock pot and cover with 1 ½ gallons of water. Add the crab boil mix and salt and pepper. Bring mixture to a boil, lower heat, and stir in tomato paste and canned tomatoes. Stir to dissolve the tomato paste. Add chopped vegetables and garlic to this mixture and continue to simmer while you prepare the roux.

In a large skillet, heat the shortening. When hot, adjust flame to medium-low (you want to keep the pan hot enough to brown your flour, but you don't want to burn it). Stir flour into shortening gradually, adding small amounts at a time and stirring constantly to mix in. Use enough flour to take up the grease (mixture should be thick – not runny – but easy to stir). Continue to brown the flour until it is a deep dark brown color. A roux can burn easily, so keep a close eye on it and make sure the flame isn't too high. Browning the roux is a time-intensive process, so be patient and never stop stirring. If you see black specks or the roux smells burnt, it probably is. Throw out the burned roux and start again – a bad roux ruins the whole pot of gumbo. Just before the roux reaches the ideal color, add in the sugar, cook and stir until the mixture becomes hard and hangs together when you lift the spoon. Let cool slightly.

Add roux to the liquid crab mixture, stirring to mix well. Let it come to a boil, then lower the heat and add the shrimp, oysters, and crab meat. Let this mixture cook for about 10 minutes. Adjust salt and seasonings, if necessary, then adjust heat so that the pot is simmering and add the filé. Let gumbo simmer on very low heat (do not let boil!) until ready to serve.

Serve in bowls over hot cooked rice.

Suggested Reading (and Watching!) on Cajun and Créole Cuisine

Epicurious on YouTube, *4 Levels of Gumbo: Amateur to Food Scientist*
([youtube.com/watch?v=55kx7jWV-NM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55kx7jWV-NM))

Constance Snow, *New Orleans: Authentic Recipes Celebrating the Foods of the World*

Jessica B. Harris, *Beyond Gumbo: Creole Fusion Food from the Atlantic Rim*

Keila V. Dawson, *Yumbo Gumbo*

Toni Tipton-Martin, *Jubilee: Recipes from Two Centuries of African-American Cooking*

Enjoy authentic & local Gumbo and Cajun Cuisine:

Pepper's Landing (Brunswick)

Bayou Kitchen (Portland)

Po' Boys & Pickles (Portland)

Mine Oyster (Boothbay Harbor)

Shaking Crab Cajun Seafood House (South Portland)