

# The New Orleans – Pinetree Connection And Gumbo!

By Dan Gill

We never really intended to feature Louisiana cooking when we opened as “Something Different” seven years ago. It all started with coffee and just kinda evolved from there.

We have always enjoyed the bold taste of coffee with chicory. During most of our married life, Barbara and I bought cans of *French Market* from the local grocery store. When they stopped carrying it, we simply called the American Coffee Company in New Orleans and ordered it by the case. We then discovered the pure pleasure of freshly roasted coffee, so when we decided to open as a specialty food store, we bought a small roaster and used coffee as a “hook” to get people to come in and try our food. Our daily feature was “Cajun KickStart”, a blend of high-grown Arabica beans fortified with a little chicory. We eventually dropped the chicory, being a little too far North for general acceptance.

Our first non-family employee was Shelley Matrana, a feisty Cajun-Italian from Houma, Louisiana (yes, I know it’s a redundancy). She made a very good chicken salad, as she had been taught by her Mama and Grandmamma back home. One day I got a call from Becky Mercuri, who had written the companion cookbook for the PBS special on “*Sandwiches That You Will Like*”. Her publishers wanted to go national with the *American Sandwich* book featuring a signature sandwich from each state. When she got to Virginia, she wanted something with country ham, but didn’t know what. During her research, she came across my old web pages on how to cure country ham and what to do with it, and she recognized me from other Internet discussions of food history and culture. She asked me if we had a special sandwich for the book. “Of course we do”, I responded, “Give me a minute”. Shelley and I then tweaked her Louisiana chicken salad to feature our smoked turkey and country ham and “*The Virginia Sandwich*” spread was born. The hardest part of the process was actually getting Shelley to measure. I won’t republish the recipe here as it was in my first PL article (March-April ’05) and is on our web page.

About the same time, I decided that the muffaletta would make an interesting addition to our sandwich repertoire. The muffaletta is the quintessential New Orleans sandwich created by Sicilian immigrants back in the late 1800’s. The original version features olive salad, mortadella bologna, capicola (similar to cured ham), salami and provolone cheese on a large (ten inch across) thin Italian loaf, usually cut into quarters. The first few times I made them, I baked the bread on the wood fired pit. I could get it up to about 800°F to make a perfect muffedetta loaf. One evening, I had the pit fired up and the bread on when I heard a large motorcycle brake hard, turn around and roar into the parking lot. It was Jimmy Sned, just back from attending Julia Child’s 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in New Orleans. After closing *The Frog and the Redneck* in Richmond, he and his wife toured

Southern eateries by motorcycle. He was heading for Urbanna, smelled the smoke and just had to find out what was cooking.

We started out using commercial bread for our barbecue and burgers, but it tended to disintegrate about halfway through our juicy sandwiches and customers had to finish eating them with a fork. Reluctantly, we started making our own buns and sub rolls out of self-defense. To get the structure and chewy texture, I started with muffaletta dough, made with a little olive oil, and used whey from making cottage cheese as the liquid. I no longer have time to make cottage cheese so we now use powdered whey, which works almost as well. We soon realized that our buns were well suited for a “mini-muffaletta”. Instead of Mortadella and Capicola, we use smoked turkey and country ham along with the olive salad, Genoa salami and melted Provolone cheese on our bun and call it the “*Virginia Muffaletta*”.

Since we had to make dough, it was only logical to roll some out in the morning, cut it into rectangles, fry it in deep fat and sprinkle it with powdered sugar to make beignets (ben-yay, Cajun doughnut). Good coffee and beignets just naturally belong together and made *Café Du Monde* World famous. As a *lagniappe* (lan-yap, small gift or extra treat), we often offer a shaker of cocoa to increase the level of decadence.

In September of our second year, Shelley’s brother decided to get married. We closed the store for a week, loaded everybody into the van and headed for South Louisiana. We ate and drank our way through New Orleans, then down to Houma and Lafayette for a real Cajun wedding, and back to New Orleans. We topped off the trip with coffee and beignets at the *Café Du Monde* and an original muffaletta from Central Grocery. This is a culinary pilgrimage that everyone should make at least once. After we got back home, we came to the realization that we were doing a pretty good job of bringing the spirit of Louisiana cooking to Virginia.

This year, after months of research and testing, we have carried the Pinetree-New Orleans connection to the next level with our own gumbo. As with most Louisiana cooking, gumbo is more method than recipe and the methods are all about developing the depth and layers of flavor. There are literally thousands of versions and variations, but most start with a roux, the heart and soul of gumbo. Up around New Orleans the roux is fairly light and blond due to the more refined Creole influence. The deeper you get into the bayous and Cajun country, the darker the roux gets and the more basic or rustic is the gumbo. Okra is often added to thicken; tomato is more Creole than Cajun.

Gumbo is very personal: I can tell you how I make mine, but you can’t make mine: When *you* make it, even using my methods and ingredients, it becomes *yours*. Mine is a Middle-of-the-road gumbo: a little Cajun, a little Creole, a little tomato, a little okra, a little meat and a little seafood. It is a synthesis of the best features from the hundreds of recipes that I have reviewed plus a few little tweaks of my own.

For a five-gallon pot, start with a couple of gallons of good stock – chicken, shrimp or fish depending upon what kind of gumbo you are making. I make turkey stock and save

the pickings. The stock should be hot before you start the roux so that you don't "shock" the roux with cold stock. I add about a quart of strong coffee for extra depth. While the stock is heating, I like to oven-roast the tomatoes and seasonings before adding them to the stock. Roasting brings out the sweetness, depth and *umami* or "savoriness" of the tomatoes and brings flavors together better than just simmering. I put about three quarts (one #10 can) of chopped or chef style tomatoes in a deep pan, add two pounds of sliced okra and two cans of *Rotel Original*, then stir in my seasonings and roast @ 350°F for about 45 minutes or until bubbly and starting to brown on top.

Seasonings – can also be added directly to the stock.

2 Tbsp garlic

½ C parsley

3 Tbsp kelp powder (optional, but adds umami - available at our store)

3 Tbsp Cajun-style seasoning or *Old Bay* (I use our Caribbean style mix called KA)

¼ Cup black pepper

¼ C cocoa

½ C Worcestershire sauce

½ C fish sauce (nuok mam)

¼ C Louisiana hot sauce

I like to prep my vegetables (the trinity) and brown about two lbs of andouille sausage before starting the roux. Chop three large onions (about four cups), dice one lb. or three cups of bell peppers, and chop two cups of celery and set aside, separately.

Next heat one cup of fat or oil (I use rendered turkey fat) in a cast-iron skillet or Dutch oven until it starts to shimmer but before it smokes, then stir in 1 cup of all purpose flour being careful to mash out all of the lumps with the back of a spoon. Keep stirring constantly as the roux darkens to prevent scorching. Be very careful not to splash any on you, or you will find out why it is called "Cajun napalm". You can stop with a blonde roux for Creole gumbo or go all of the way to a deep chocolate or mahogany for Cajun-style. The darker the roux, the less thickening power it has. I like mine fairly dark. If you start getting black specks, you have burned the roux and you have to throw it out and start all over. Don't argue, do it!

When the roux is right, add the onions, celery, peppers and andouille, in that order, to stop the browning. I let them simmer for a few minutes, then put a lid on so they can sweat until the onions and celery are tender, stirring occasionally to keep from burning.

When you are ready, carefully whisk the roux mixture into the hot stock. Next add some cooked or browned meat: alligator, nutria, turtle, or whatever you can find. I use about two quarts of chicken or turkey from making the stock, broken into thumb-sized pieces. Smoked meat brings its own personality to the party. I also puree the turkey cracklin's left from rendering the fat and add them for flavor and color. Bring everything to a boil then reduce to a simmer for an hour or two, or a day – it doesn't really matter.

If you are making seafood gumbo, add shellfish at the very end of cooking or just before serving. Shrimp, scallops and oysters over-cook readily and get tough. I add two lbs of popcorn shrimp just as I turn off the heat.

Gumbo is traditionally served over rice in a bowl. Since we pack in pints and quarts for retail, it is easier to cook the rice with the gumbo. When you think it is about done, stir in about three cups of long grain white rice and cook about 30 more minutes. Adjust water and seasonings to taste. It will thicken as it is cooled and re-heated.

Serve with a shaker of file' (fee-lay, powdered sassafras leaves) and maybe some chopped green onion or chives for garnish. Native Americans used sassafras leaves for seasoning and thickening stews as first reported by explorers on Sir Walter Raleigh's early expeditions to North Carolina. Cajuns picked it up from the Choctaws in Louisiana. In fact, the Choctaw word for sassafras may be the source of the word "gumbo", but some think it came from the African word for okra. In any event, file' is generally not served with gumbos thickened with okra, but I like how it transforms the flavor, so I use it anyway. File' may also be mixed with the gumbo just before serving, but don't cook with it or it gets stringy.

One last cautionary note: Either keep soups hot (above 140°F) until they are served, which in some cases may be several hours, or chill to 40°F or less as quickly as possible. A five-gallon pot of gumbo, or soup, or stock will take many hours to chill all of the way through in a refrigerator and can grow some mighty unfriendly critters. I have a tall, small-diameter stainless steel dairy bucket that I can immerse in an ice bath and roll into the cooler. Some cooks have a special "cold paddle" to bring the temperature down quickly. You can also freeze some plastic drink bottles (almost) full of water and stir them around in your soup pot to chill it before putting it away. Be safe and enjoy!

***Laissez les bon temps rouler!*** (lazay lay bon tom roulay, let the good times roll)

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