

COOKIN' IN LOUISIANA WITH A SIDE OF BLUES

Photo by © Joseph A. Rosen

By Kenny Neal

Not only was I brought up with the blues – playing guitar and beating drums around the house as a kid – the kitchen was the next room over and there was always something stewing on the stove. In Louisiana, we have a passion for music, food and fun.

My family loves to cook outside on burners and in big cast iron skillet pots – that way, nobody gets left out, there's enough food for everyone. We also like to compete against each other when cooking. Nowadays, being the eldest of 10, I sit back and watch my younger siblings cook because they all think they're the best in the world. They show up for a big cookout, each bringing their own burners and covering their seasonings with duct tape so no one will find out their secret recipe. I have a great time because I leave it up to the young ones now, and I go around tasting the food, telling each one they are the best... to stay on everyone's good side.

The biggest day for me as a kid growing up was the 4th of July. That was the day my mom relaxed and let my dad do the cooking and barbecuing. After a great day of food and fun, we'd pack up the instruments and go to my uncle's club called Spooners Place, the only spot where teenagers could go to dance and listen to live music. It's also where my mom and dad met each other. We always had a great time performing there

for our hometown folks, playing the blues. At the end of the night, it was time for more food, and that's when my Aunt Gert would be ready to sell you a potato salad, a fried chicken sandwich or a hot sausage link boiled, with a side order of crackers and mustard.

I was brought up with different types of cooks in my family. My grandmother was a slow cook, she believed in taking her time and letting the food simmer. We'd run into the house and ask if the food was ready, and she'd say, "No, and get out of here. Go back into the yard and play." We would be really hungry when it came to eating time, but it was well worth the wait. My mom is a fast cook, she can whip it up in no time like magic and still does it today – but I guess that's what happens when you have 10 kids. Everyday it's like a meeting at my mom's house. We go by to visit and there's always something on the stove. She can't help it, she just has a passion for cooking and loves to see people enjoy her food. We had a restaurant at the night club called Neal's Place, and everybody came to buy Mommy's food. When I'm out and around town, my friends don't ask me about my touring, they ask me what my mother has cooked, what's on the menu for today.

My favorite dish is okra, shrimp and sausage over rice. When I come off the road from touring, I go straight to my mom's house and she always has okra prepared for me. This dish has been passed down from generations. I learned something about okra when I toured Africa back in the '90s. I went to a restaurant in Nairobi and noticed the cook was preparing okra, so I asked the waiter about how they prepared it. He said, "This is not okra, this is gumbo." That's when it all came together for me, making my connections with Africa. After all the years I've been enjoying okra, I never knew it was called gumbo in Africa. Now I know why we're all so big on gumbo down here in Louisiana – it's our roots. Gumbo is my other favorite dish to make. A gumbo recipe is mostly just a guideline, it's really a hands-on situation, eyeballing everything. I think it's the most fun dish to make because it's always different every time you make it.

I still do most of the cooking here at home, but I have changed the way I cook. I use less grease, I stay away from frying, but I can still have the same flavor and taste and enjoy my Southern dish. I remember my mother having me stand at the stove stirring



The legendary musical Neal family, circa 1970s Photo courtesy Kenny Neal

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the roux, and I can still hear her say, "Keep stirring, don't let it burn." Nowadays, we have instant roux, which saves a lot of time and is healthier. I have to say, it's pretty close to the real old fashioned cooking; they have mastered it. Also, down here in Louisiana, crawfish wasn't as big as it is today. It was just for local folks then, like our own secret.

One thing I know for sure, the food here in Louisiana is different from anywhere in the United States. It's something about our music and food – it goes together. So I'd like to leave you with my favorite recipe: Okra, Shrimp and Sausage. Please enjoy! 🎵

OKRA, SHRIMP AND SAUSAGE RECIPE

2 pounds cut okra
2 tablespoons vinegar
1 tomato, diced
1 bell pepper, finely chopped
1 big onion, finely chopped
1 stalk celery, finely chopped
½ cup green onions, chopped
1½ pounds shrimp, peeled and deveined
1 pound smoked sausage, cut into quarter pieces

Fry okra in oil, and add in vinegar, tomato, bell pepper, onion, celery and green onions. Fry it all about fifteen minutes, then add the sausage, shrimp and half a cup of water. Simmer about fifteen minutes and serve over rice.



Kenny Neal boils crawfish, a staple dish in Louisiana Photo courtesy Kenny Neal