

Chef's Corner: Cobia Seafood Gumbo

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Cajun cooking comes to town in this Classic Seafood Gumbo that highlights the perfect blend of cubed Virginia Cobia and fresh North Carolina Shrimp!

Waste not, want not continues to be my theme as I explore the ethical utilization of all edible morsels from our catch or harvest.

This recipe utilizes the sweet head meat and other trimmings taken from the tail, belly, fins, and loins of a freshly filleted 42-inch Cobia.

The firm texture of Cobia meat makes it a great ingredient in soups, stews, and pasta dishes because it does not easily dissolve like many lighter fish.

The head, cheek, and neck meat are wonderfully rich in flavor, as are the trimmings carved out of the ribs, tail, and muscular fins (also called “collars”).

The high Omega3 fat content of these choice cuts yields delicious heart-healthy meat rich in flavor and loaded with key immune-boosting nutrients.

My hope is that this delicious Gumbo recipe makes anglers think twice about how they process their catch the next time they are fortunate enough to land one of these versatile Cobia fish!

Cobia Seafood Gumbo

Pictured at right is the Cobia used to build this recipe. There is no better way to utilize all of the fish than this!

Ingredients:

A rich seafood gumbo can be made with just about any combination of seafood or fish you have on hand. I chose Cobia for its texture and flavor, but this will work with other firm-fleshed fish such as Red Drum, Stingray, or Halibut.

Regardless, combinations that include shrimp or crab to complement the fish will produce a sweet and spicy Gumbo that begins with the stock!



Cobia Seafood Gumbo with Jasmine Rice!



Author with the 42-inch Cobia featured in this recipe!

Seafood Stock for the Gumbo:

- 1 Large Cobia head with pectoral fins/collars intact
- 2 Large blue crabs (live – these were leftover Sheepshead bait!)
- 3 Large chowder clams (fresh – leftover Spadefish bait!)
- 6-10 garlic cloves, crushed to release oils
- 3-5 bay leaves
- 1 tablespoon whole black peppercorns
- Vegetable trimmings and ends (onion, peppers, celery, etc.)
- Enough water to cover all ingredients in a large stew pot as shown



Simmering the Seafood Stock!

Gumbo Ingredients:

Note that many of these ingredients are optional or were based on what was in hand at the time. Gumbo, like many soups and stews, is very versatile – so feel free to experiment! Here are the ingredients used for this particular pot of goodness!

- Boiled Cobia meat from head, collars, and bones
- 1-1/2 pounds cubed Cobia meat
- 1-1/2 pounds fresh NC shrimp
- 1/4-pound crabmeat (from crabs in stock pot)
- 1-pound fresh Andouille Sausage
- Bag chopped frozen okra (fresh if you have it)
- Diced garlic
- Onions, chopped
- 8 cups cooked Dirty Rice (optional)
- Celery, chopped
- Green bell peppers, chopped
- Parsley, chopped
- ½ cup chopped green onions
- Fresh tomatoes, finely chopped (or whole canned tomatoes – diced will work, too)
- Tabasco sauce
- Chopped cilantro or parsley (garnish)
- Fresh green chiles and scallions on the side



Smoked Andouille Sausage!



Fresh Cubed Cobia Meat!



Fresh Peeled & Deveined NC Shrimp!

Gumbo Roux

The roux is what makes the gumbo and gives it its texture while binding all the flavors and spices into a silky-smooth bowl of flavor!

These simple ingredients make for an excellent Gumbo roux:

- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup bacon grease (vegetable oil and butter are suitable substitutes)

Sometimes a little more flour is required to achieve the right texture, but a 1:1 ration is a good point of departure.

Gumbo Spices:

- Sea salt
- Black pepper
- Smoked paprika to taste
- Whole leaf thyme
- Gumbo Filé powder
- Add Cayenne for more “kick!”



Stirring the basic Roux!

Variations: This recipe is not rigid by any means. There are many ways to play this based on your personal taste and what you have on hand. Other ingredients might include carrots, mushrooms, fresh chili/jalapeno peppers, baby clams, mussels, scallops, oysters, crawfish, chicken, etc. You can also use diced potatoes and serve as a Gumbo soup vice over rice (Cajun sacrilege, but it works!). So, enjoy this “suggested” list of ingredients, but improvise at will! I recommend using fresh shrimp when you can get them, but frozen is fine and will make an excellent dish. I like to use small to medium size shrimp. If you only have extra-large size, I suggest cutting them in half, so they fit in your soup spoon!

Directions:

Preparing the Seafood Stock:

After gently simmering the stock ingredients until done, strain the stock into a large vessel and begin refining the strained stock by letting the sediment settle. Carefully ladle-away clear stock into a large vessel until the thin cloudy layer is reached. Pour the remaining cloudy stock into a narrow container and let settle again, pour out the remaining clear liquid and discard the trace stock that remains cloudy. The clear, refined stock is now ready for building the Gumbo!

NOTE: If you want an extra-rich stock, you can return the refined stock to the stove and simmer-off some liquid, but do so gently, and just under the boil.

Preparing the Roux:

There are lots of ways to make a Roux, but you get out what you put into it, so I like to work it slow and steady to get that rich dark color without burning the mixture. How long does this take? I once saw a show featuring Chef Emeril Lagasse, and he quipped: “A good roux takes about three beers!” That’s a rule of thumb I can live with!

To get the Roux dark enough for this recipe, it takes almost a full hour of almost constant stirring, but it’s worth every second!

In a heavy skillet, preferably cast-iron, melt the bacon grease over moderately low heat, add the flour, and cook the roux, stirring constantly, for 30-45 minutes, or until it is the color of cocoa.

Building the Gumbo:

In a heavy Gumbo Pot, sauté onion, peppers, and celery until they begin to soften. Add the Andouille sausage, okra, and garlic, and cook until just golden.

When the roux is ready, add it to the pot of garlic, celery, okra, and onion and cook for 2-3 minutes, gently stirring until the roux absorbs all the juices and is well mixed. Set the mixture aside.



Cobia Head, Fin, & Collar Meat Picked, Reserved, & Chopped!



Chopped Onion, Peppers, & Celery!



Folding the veggies into Roux!



Folding in the Andouille Sausage!

In a large pot, bring the refined seafood stock to a boil, add the roux mixture, filé powder, tomatoes with juice, bay leaf, parsley, thyme, and celery leaves. Simmer the mixture for 50 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Stir in the cubed Cobia meat, shrimp, and the picked crabmeat and Cobia meat reserved from the stock pot. Simmer the gumbo for 5 minutes, or until the cubed Cobia chunks and shrimp are firm. Discard the bay leaf and serve the gumbo sprinkled with the filé powder.

Adjust seasoning as needed with salt, pepper, smoked paprika, and hot sauce.

Notes on Thickening the Gumbo:

Three of the ingredients contribute to “tightening-up” the Gumbo.

1. The Roux is a classic thickener used in many recipes, but for Gumbo, the trick is to produce a silky chocolate-colored Roux without overcooking to a burnt flavor.
2. Okra also has a nice thickening effect and adds its own distinct texture and body to the Gumbo.
3. The filé powder is made from dried sassafras leaves and adds a nice flavor while also helping to thicken the Gumbo.

The combination results in a richly flavored Gumbo stew with an incredibly silky texture that is perfect served over rice in the Cajun tradition!

Serving the Gumbo:

Place a generous serving of rice in a wide bowl and ladle the Gumbo over the rice. If you want a milder effect, use more rice and less Gumbo. I like it rich, so I go with about 2 heavy scoops of Gumbo to one light scoop of rice.



Lay a Bed of Dirty Rice!



Ladle Gumbo over Dirty Rice!



Add Chopped Scallions & Peppers!

Finish it off with a sprinkle of filé powder and chopped scallions, cilantro, or parsley for garnish and a refreshing flavor barrage! It's also acceptable to have Tabasco and/or other favorite Louisiana hot sauce for those that care to kick it up further!

Just for the record, this dish is even better the next day, and I have been known to let it “rest” in the fridge for a day or two before serving for that very reason!

So, the next time you catch a stocky Cobia, try this recipe out to fully utilize the entire fish and preserve the Cajun tradition!

Contributed by: CHAC member John Germanos, aka “The Instinctive Chef”

