

In Defense of Okra

What did okra ever do to you? Besides being an itchy plant when it grows, it is harmless. But, throughout so much of the country it has gotten a reputation for being slimy, unappetizing or only good for frying. I am here to stand up for okra and tell you why you should give it a second chance. I first came across okra on a trip to India in 2007. In India they call okra “lady’s fingers”. The traditional dish is called bhindi masala where the okra is chopped up and mixed with onions, garlic, chilis, tomatoes and a variety of fragrant and mouth watering Indian spices. Serve me that and some warm roti (Indian whole-wheat bread) and I am in heaven. I fell in love with okra immediately. Upon my return to the states I began to seek it out. And it was then that I realized that we are a nation of okra-haters. Slowly but surely I had to make my case one dish at a time. I made jambalayas, I added it to stir-fries, I roasted it and I, of course, made a lot of bhindi masala.

As a future dietitian I appreciate the fact that okra is low calorie (50 calories per cup) and high in fiber (3g per cup). But my favorite thing about cooking with okra is that it is a natural thickener. Instead of added flour or roux to a recipe, okra becomes a natural, low calorie – zero fat way of providing thickness and texture to dishes. So, the next time you see okra at the farmer’s market don’t run away. Pick out the smaller pods (they are the most tender) and go home and try this recipe for bhindi masala and tell me you haven’t come over to my side!

Pippa’s Recipe for Bhindi Masala

Ingredients:

- 1 Tbsp cumin
- 1 Tbsp coriander
- 1.5 tsp turmeric
- 1 tsp garam masala
- 1 tsp curry powder
- 2 tsp smoked paprika
- (it isn’t an exact science – if you don’t have all these spices it is not the end of the world – it will still be delicious!)
- 2 Tbsp minced ginger
- 3 cloves minced garlic
- 1 serrano chili or jalapeno, minced
- 1 large red onion, chopped or sliced
- 2 large fresh tomatoes, chopped (or use canned tomatoes if tomatoes are not in season)
- 3 cups sliced okra (1/2 inch thick)
- Vegetable or chicken stock for thinning

What to do:

- Heat 2 Tbsp of canola oil in a deep skillet or pot
- Add the spices and mix into the oil until just fragrant (30 sec.)
- Add the onions, chili, ginger and garlic and stir constantly until coated with the spices
- Season with salt and pepper to taste
- Once the mixture starts to stick a little after a few minutes, deglaze with a little stock and get all the bits up off the bottom of the pan
- Add the tomatoes and okra
- Stir together and bring to a boil (the tomatoes and okra will release a lot of liquid), then turn it down to a simmer (med-low)
- Let the masala cook until the tomatoes have broken down and the okra is tender and has done its thickening duties.
- Taste before serving to make sure it is seasoned well.
- Serve with chopped cilantro and lime wedges
- It can be served over rice or with warm roti (my favorite!)