Sides

West African Okra Stew

A dense, richly seasoned tomato and palm oil base into which shredded okra is stirred to release its natural mucilaginous thickener, building a silky, savory pot fragrant with crayfish and dried fish. Eaten over fufu, rice, or eba, it is a complete meal in a single pot.

Time 45 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 400 g Fresh okra, tops removed
- ☐ 150 g White onion, finely diced
- ☐ 300 g Ripe tomatoes, roughly chopped
- ☐ 20 g Ground crayfish (dried ground shrimp)
- ☐ 150 ml Fish or chicken stock, or water
- ☐ 60 ml Palm oil (red, unrefined)
- ☐ 1 piece Scotch bonnet pepper, seeds in or out to taste
- ☐ 30 g Tomato paste
- ☐ 80 g Stockfish (pre-soaked and shredded) or dried fish
- ☐ 5 g Salt, to taste

Let's make it.

01 Heat the palm oil in a heavy pot or Dutch oven over medium heat until it liquefies and shimmers — palm oil is solid at room temperature and needs a moment. Add the diced onion and whole or roughly chopped scotch bonnet. Fry, stirring occasionally, until the onion is soft, translucent, and beginning to take on color at the edges, about 7–8 minutes. The palm oil and onion together form the aromatic foundation of the stew. The kitchen will fill with the unmistakable, earthy fragrance of red palm oil — this is correct.

02 Add the fresh tomatoes and tomato paste to the pot. Stir to combine and increase heat slightly. Cook uncovered, stirring frequently, until the tomatoes have completely broken down and the mixture has reduced substantially — about 12–15 minutes. The critical sign you are looking for is the oil rising to the surface and pooling at the edges of the pot. In Nigerian cooking this is called 'the oil floating' and signals that the water from the tomatoes has been driven off and the stew base is properly fried and concentrated.

03 Add the ground crayfish, pre-soaked shredded stockfish, and stock or water. Stir thoroughly and taste — the crayfish adds an intense, oceanic umami note and a faint sweetness that is the backbone of West African stews. If using stockfish, it should be pre-soaked for 24–48 hours and is already softened; dried fish (e.g. eja osan) goes in dry and rehydrates in the pot. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook for 5 minutes to marry the flavors. Taste and begin adjusting salt at this stage.

04 Prepare the okra according to preferred texture: for a very slimy (draw) stew — traditional and prized in many regions — shred the okra by grating on a box grater or pulsing briefly in a food processor. For a less mucilaginous version with discrete rounds, slice crosswise into 1 cm coins. Both methods release the mucilage that thickens the stew; shredding releases far more and produces a denser, more viscous result. Whichever method you use, the okra should be cut just before adding to the pot to prevent oxidation.

05 Add the okra to the simmering base. Stir once to incorporate, then resist the urge to stir vigorously or frequently — excessive stirring breaks down the okra and makes the stew overly slimy rather than silky. Cook on medium-low heat for 8–12 minutes, stirring gently only 2–3 times, until the okra is fully tender and the stew has thickened to a viscous, glossy consistency. Taste and adjust salt. The stew should be thick enough to mound slightly on a spoon and should coat the back of it. Serve over fufu, pounded yam, eba, or steamed rice.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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