



OKRA

Ingredient of the Month



Presented by ACFEF Chef & Child Foundation
and Clemson University

Okra, also known as lady's fingers, is a pod grown in tropical and sub-tropical regions around the world. Infamously known for its slimy texture, okra was first discovered in Ethiopia, as well as some areas of Sudan. It made its next appearance along the Nile River around the 13th century. Okra made its way to the southern United States from Africa on slave ships. After discovering its thickening abilities, people began using okra instead of flour to thicken a stew consisting of vegetables and seafood, which is known today as "gumbo."

Most varieties of okra produce green pods with a pointed end. It has a smooth and slightly fuzzy external texture that can be ribbed or un-ribbed depending on the variety. Internally, okra

contains little white seeds, and, when sliced, okra begins to produce a sticky or slimy juice. Okra grows best in warm climates. In the United States, it is planted in the spring, and it can continue producing until the first frost in the fall, if picked every day. Although available year-round in the South, the season for the rest of the country is from about May through October. Fresh okra contains fair amounts of fiber. The consumption of ½ cup of raw okra provides 1.3 grams of fiber, and ½ cup of cooked okra provides 2 grams of fiber. This vegetable is also a good source of potassium, vitamins A and C, as well as folic acid and other B vitamins.

Healthy Ingredient Contribution

DIETARY FIBER: Consuming ½ cup of cooked okra provides 2 grams of dietary fiber, which is a good nutrient for cholesterol control and weight control and reduction. The rich fiber content in okra pods also aids in more efficient peristalsis of digestive food particles, which helps relieve constipation.

FOLATE: One serving of raw okra provides approximately 22% of the recommended dietary allowance per 100 grams. Consuming foods rich in folate prior to conception helps decrease the occurrence of neural tube defects in babies.

VITAMIN A: Compared to other green vegetables, okra has one of the highest levels of vitamin A. This vitamin is essential for vision, and it helps to maintain healthy mucus membranes and skin. Research shows that significant consumption of vitamin A provides protection from lung and oral cavity cancers.

VITAMIN C: One serving of raw okra provides about 35% of the daily-recommended levels of vitamin C. Related research shows a correlation between vitamin C consumption and developed immunity against infectious agents. Consuming vitamin C also reduces colds and coughing.

VITAMIN K: Okra is an excellent source of vitamin K. This vitamin is a cofactor for blood clotting enzymes, which means it aids in blood clotting. It is also important for strengthening bones.

Varieties and Uses

In the southern regions of the United States, okra is commonly sliced, rolled in flour or cornmeal, and fried. Okra is also cooked in vegetable soups and gumbo where it works as a thickener. Pickling okra with peppers and garlic is another popular way of preparing okra.

ANNIE OAKLEY: This is a spineless variety. It is a hybrid plant that produces bright green angular pods. Annie Oakley grows best in cooler areas, and it also takes about 53-55 days to produce.

CLEMSON SPINELESS: Possessing slightly rigid pods, this variety takes around 50 days to appear. The plant produces medium-dark green, angular pods. The seeds are open-pollinated and self-pollinating. This means that the seeds can be saved and planted at another time. Clemson spineless pods account for most of the commercially grown okra in California.

EMERALD: This variety produces dark-green pods that are smooth and angular. Like Clemson Spineless, Emerald produces spineless pods that remain tender even when the pods are large.

RED: Red okra is similar in texture and flavor to the green type, but reverts to green when cooked.

Fun Facts

- Okra is related to the marsh mallow, which unlike its fluffy manmade snack food with the same name, is actually a shrub that grows in marshy areas. Okra is a member of the mallow plant family, along with hibiscus and cotton.
- Okra seeds can be roasted, ground, and served as a substitute for coffee.

Storage

Refrigerate fresh okra in a plastic bag for up to 3 days.

Serving Size

½ cup cooked okra contains 20 calories, 0 grams fat, 2 grams fiber, and 1.5 grams protein, while also providing 20 percent recommended daily value (DV) for vitamin C.

Contributions for this article were made by Sarah Boyd. The following recipe was created and tested by Clemson University's Culinary Nutrition Undergraduate Student Research Group.

RECIPE

GRILLED OKRA PIZZA

Yield: 5 servings (serving size: 2 wedges)

Ingredients

8 ounces fresh okra, trimmed	½ cup hummus
¼ teaspoons salt, divided	¼ cup pesto
¼ teaspoons freshly ground pepper, divided	¼ cup sliced red onion
2 teaspoons olive oil	½ cup shredded mozzarella cheese
Cooking spray	2 tablespoons grated Romano cheese
16 ounces pizza dough	

- 1) Prepare grill to high.
- 2) Toss together okra, olive oil, salt, and pepper in a large bowl. Place okra on grill rack, cover, and grill for 2 to 3 minutes on each side or until tender. Cool 5 minutes and cut into slices.
- 3) Roll pizza dough into a 12-inch circle on a lightly floured surface. Place dough on grill rack coated with cooking spray; grill 3 minutes or until browned or until blistered. Remove from grill.
- 4) Spread hummus evenly over grilled side of crust, leaving a ½-inch border. Spread pesto over hummus leaving a 1-inch border. Arrange okra slices and onions over sauces; top with cheeses. Return pizza to grill rack, cover, and grill for 4 minutes or until thoroughly cooked. Cut pizza into 10 wedges.



Nutrition Information

Calories: 380	Sodium: 730mg	Vitamin A: 8%
Fat: 17g	Fiber: 4g	Vitamin C: 20%
Saturated fat: 4.5g	Sugars: 3g	Calcium: 30%
Carbohydrates: 49g	Protein: 15g	Iron: 20%

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