

A Humble Student

OF NEW ORLEANS COOKING



By L. Kasimu Harris

I grew up in New Orleans, one of the culinary capitals of the world. Here, leaving home for a delicious meal was not required. My parents cooked. Eartha and LeRoy Harris lovingly prepared stuffed bell peppers, seafood gumbo, red beans & rice, succotash, and smothered shrimp and okra with tomatoes and rice. I can't make any of that. Unlike my parents, I didn't grow up in the kitchen. I opted out of lessons for games on my Nintendo.

However, I can cook. Oftentimes, my 77-year-old father hangs with me in the kitchen, we sip beers or bourbon, and I sop up decades of squandered culinary tutelage. My mother is an ancestor now. As an adult, food has become social. My wife, Ariel Wilson-Harris, and I love to entertain. It seems every few months we're inviting over folks just because the sun is shining. Oftentimes, that guest list includes chefs—ambitious or asinine on my part. But, while entertaining them, they are often educating me.

Dr. Howard Conyers, a rocket scientist and a pitmaster, taught me about barbequing with indirect heat. Tunde Wey is a confi-

dence builder. James Cullen improved my tempura okra and saved Christmas 2019, over the phone, as he coached me through smoking my brined turkey—the heat was too high. And while I've never cooked for Nina Compton, my steak game improved after watching her at home render the fat of the steak and baste it with butter, garlic, and rosemary.

In 2020, for me and many others, cooking at home became far more necessary than ever. The food itself and the required preparation was more than sustenance or a means for entertainment, it was a respite from being at home, while still being home. It is a way to connect to my family's history, in the midst of an uncertain future, and an immersion into a proverbial culinary classroom that I once opted out of.

But, I feel incomplete without a mastery of venerable New Orleans dishes. My children enjoy being in the kitchen, and it's my obligation to teach them what my dad is teaching me—they just can't have drinks yet.

L. Kasimu Harris is a New Orleans-based artist who strives to tell stories of underrepresented communities in New Orleans and beyond through different strategic and conceptual devices. In 2020 his writing and photographs were featured in "A Shot Before Last Call: Capturing New Orleans's Vanishing Black Bars" that was published in The New York Times. He has written essays on food, culture, and photography for various publications. As an artist, Kasimu has been exhibited both nationally and internationally. His work has been featured at the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art, August Wilson African American Cultural Center, and Ford Foundation Gallery. He has been an Artist in Residence with two institutions.

Kasimu earned a BBA in Entrepreneurship from Middle Tennessee State University and an MA in Journalism from the University of Mississippi. He is on the boards of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art and the New Orleans Photo Alliance and is a member of the Peauxdunque Writers Alliance and the Antenna Gallery Collective.



Photo by Kenny Morrison



Blackened Shrimp and Okra

THIS RECIPE WAS INSPIRED BY BRYANT TERRY'S *AFRO-VEGAN*
AND ELAINE WILSON, MY MOTHER-IN-LAW



Photo by Kenny Morrison

INGREDIENTS

Shrimp

1 pound shrimp
½ teaspoon coarse sea salt
Black pepper, to taste
2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
2 tablespoons olive oil

Okra

2 pounds small to medium okra pods
2 teaspoons coarse sea salt
4 tablespoons blackened seasoning

Drink something cold (it would be a beer for me) and play Olu Dara's *From Natchez to New York*, with special attention to the first cut, "Okra."

HOW TO PREPARE

Peel and devein the shrimp, leaving tails on, if desired. Marinate the shrimp in a bowl with olive oil, coarse sea salt, fresh black pepper, and fresh lemon juice.

Get your grill ready, about medium-high heat. But, I wouldn't fire up a grill to make just one thing, so I'd advise having something else to put on. And soak skewers, if wooden, to prevent from burning.

Bring about 12 cups of water to boil in a large pot. Add the two teaspoons of salt and a pound of okra at a time and blanch for a minute. Drain well. Transfer to a large bowl and drizzle with olive oil and toss until evenly coated. Sprinkle the blackened seasoning and toss until evenly coated. Place the shrimp and okra on skewers, leaving about ¾ of an inch between them, and cook for about 3 to 4 minutes on each side.

Note: This recipe can be cooked in an oven for those without grills. Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Oil your skewers before placing on the shrimp and okra, then lay them out on a sheet pan. Start checking at 10 minutes; it's ready when the shrimp are pink and the okra are tender, usually after 15 to 20 minutes.