

A red cutting board filled with fresh, green okra (ladyfinger) vegetables, some whole and some sliced, arranged in a pile.

LIFE

A round, white ceramic bowl with a red rim, containing a light-colored, textured dip or sauce. The bowl is set on a white surface. The background is a blurred pattern of yellow and green, possibly a checkered tablecloth.

east meets
south

EXOTIC FLAVORS FUSE EFFORTLESSLY WITH
DOWNHOME SOUTHERN STAPLES AT THE
BHOJANIC INDIAN RESTAURANT NEAR EMORY UNIVERSITY

WRITTEN AND STYLED BY ANGIE MOSIER PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRIAN WOODCOCK

When buying okra choose small, tender pods, two to three inches long. ■ To many, okra is simply a humble, Southern vegetable. With its beginnings in Africa and influence in Middle Eastern, Indian and Asian cooking, it is worldly wise. ■ Four generations of women gather around the table to talk food, family and tradition. From left to right: Purnima Malhotra, Archana Becker, Chaya Becker, and Nirmila Arnejal.



f Four beautiful women sit around a table—four generations actually. Two are sleek and elegant, their black-and-silver hair pulled back. They have wrapped themselves shoulder to toe in colorful saris—the traditional flowing silk garments worn by the women of India. One of the women is younger, quite beautiful, and has donned colorful clothing typical of any hip mom. The other little lady is the smallest of the quartet, 2 years old and fluent in the Hindi spoken by her grandmother and great-grandmother as well as the English that her mother, chef Archana Becker, speaks to her. Little Chaya, who will grow up in America like her mom, will no doubt be well-versed in the Indian traditions of dress, language, song and food that are so important to her family. This table is laden with the food that the family loves: Chicken Tikka Masala, a beautiful tandoori chicken in tomato cream sauce; Punjabi Kardhi, onion dumplings in yogurt curry; mango chutney; Masala Papadam; a crunchy flatbread topped with diced tomatoes, onions and fresh herbs; and Bhindi Masala, which is what we, as Southerners, know as okra. Joining this outdoor feast are two husbands, one brother and a son. Family and tradition at work and at play.

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The family business is the wonderful Bhojanic Restaurant located in the Emory University area of Decatur. "We started out as a family who just loves food, loves to cook and loves getting together to eat," says Archna. "Many of our friends and my parents' colleagues would inquire about catering for parties and weddings. We started a company called ANIC which stands for Atlanta Northern Indian Caterers. My family comes from northern India and that region, like all the regions, has a distinct style of cuisine. Our connections with many of the professionals at Emory University and Hospital led to a successful catering business, which is still thriving." In fact, ANIC Catering has specialized in catering for "green rooms" for visiting celebrities and musicians. Anic's food has been enjoyed by personalities from Salman Rushdie to The Allman Brothers, and this year it will provide food for the Dalai Lama as he travels through Atlanta.

Bhojanic was a logical evolution of their popular business, and the restaurant was named by combining their existing company name with the Hindi word "bhojan," which means food, diet, provisions, nourishment, "everything your body needs," Archna explains. "Our restaurant is truly a family-run affair," explains Archna's father, Surender Malhotra. "The regional recipes I learned from my mother, my mother-in-law, Nirmila, who works with us now, my father and my brother, who is a talented chef in London. My wife, Purnima, and I cook daily at the restaurant." Guarav, his son, interrupts: "Here's the breakdown of Bhojanic: Archna is the 'mouth' of the business, her husband, Aaron Becker, is the accountant, my parents are the cooks, I am the taste tester [and musician and entertainment Booker], and my grandmother, Nirmila, is the boss—she has the last word." The family breaks into laughter, all agreeing, and Nirmila replies in her native tongue, "Yes, I have to keep them on track."

What has happened at Bhojanic is a wonderful mix of traditional tastes with a style of serving that the public might not expect when going out to eat Indian food. The bar at Bhojanic is colorful and hip, and while they do offer some traditional Indian beverages, they will also mix a martini or offer a selection of the smartest microbrews. Jazz is piped through the sound system if there is no live music, and paintings by local artists hang on



Exotic spices like cardamom, cayenne, cinnamon, cloves, black salt and mango powder provide the complex flavors in traditional Indian cuisine. ■ Traditional Indian spices cardamom and saffron are folded into a creamy cheesecake for dessert. ■ Surender Malhotra learned regional northern Indian cooking from his father, mother, mother-in-law and brother. ■ Nirmila Arnejal, the matriarch of the family, strikes an elegant pose as she looks proudly around the table laden with her recipes and the children who carry them on.





ARCHNA'S BHINDI MASALA

This is a classic, northern Indian dish served at Archna Becker's family-run restaurant, Bhojanic, located in the Emory area of Decatur. This okra is rich with deep flavor and is pleasantly spicy. The color is a beautiful green coated with a transparent red from the spices. The okra maintains its texture while slices of caramelized onion provide a bit of sweetness that mingles very nicely with the slight heat from the peppers.

Serves 4-6

Note: The spices in this recipe can be found in most international food markets, including the Dekalb Farmer's Market. It is best to buy these whole and grind them with a spice grinder or mortar and pestle, but you can use pre-ground.

- 2 lbs. yellow onion
- 2 lbs. baby okra
- 1-2 tsp. of mango powder
- 2-3 green chilies (like serrano), seeded and diced finely
- 2 tsp. ground cumin*
- 4 tsp. ground coriander*
- 2 tsp. ground fennel*
- ¼ tsp. ground turmeric
- 2-4 tsp. of salt to taste
- 1-2 tsp. of cayenne
- Fresh cilantro leaves for garnish
- * coarse (not powder)

Cut the stem and the tip off of the okra pods and discard. If the okra is over 3 inches long, you may need to cut off a bit of the pod, near the stem end, that is thick and tough. Slice the okra crosswise, making quarter-inch slices that resemble little wheels. Slice the onions into long, thin slivers. Sauté onions over medium-low heat until caramelized (about 15 minutes) and all the excess water is evaporated. Add the okra, the diced chilies and the mango powder and sauté until the okra is a bright green color and most of the slime is gone. Add the rest of the dried spices and cook until incorporated. Garnish with cilantro.



Archna's son, Avi Becker, sneaks a sample of Bhindi Masala. ■ Bright mango chutney is a traditional Indian condiment. Its fruity tang sits nicely with rich curries and the spicy bhindi. ■ Hot Southern summers are the perfect conditions for this versatile plant. ■ Hollyhock blossoms sit alongside their cousin in the plant family, okra.

the walls. Emory students make up a good part of the staff, and they can explain the home-style food without a stutter. There is a comfort level at Bhojanic, which Archna explains comes from a few directives: "The décor is not fancy because all of our money goes into the food. We have a full bar and live music, but mostly I think that the food is friendly. This is not fancy food; it is what we cook when we are at home. You can order small plates like a tapas restaurant, or you can order a combination plate, or as you say here in the South, 'meat and three.' Choose a meat from our list of meats and then choose two or three sides—all traditional—all home-style."

Sitting down at a colorful table, a glance around the room shows a diverse crowd. When the "meat and three" arrives, it is presented on a chic metal server that looks like an old school lunch tray. One can't help but smile and regard the similarities between Southern home-style and this offering. There is the meat and vegetables, but also pickles and bread. As you dig into the bhindi, Archna's grandmother passes through the room. You can't help but think of your own grandmother and how much this place makes you feel at home.

BHOJANIC
Homestyle Indian
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Angie Mosier on Okra

When I was a kid, we would visit my grandfather's farm in a "holler" in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains in east Tennessee. It was there I got my country education: stringing and breaking pole beans on the porch, pumping water, using an outhouse and picking okra. Picking anything in the Southern summer is hot, dirty work, but okra is one of those vegetables that makes you really earn it. The fine, prickly hairs of the pods get in your skin before you realize it, and a child's tender fingers will puff with irritation. Okra is also difficult to pick. You can't just snap it off; you have to cut it. Then there is the slicing for preparation. It is weird and slimy. Folks who claim they don't like okra usually cite the slime as the reason, but that slime has a purpose.

Okra was brought to the United States on slave ships from Africa and thrives in the hot Southern sun. Those brilliant cooks who were also brought on those same ships are the ones who should get the credit for teaching us what to do with the vegetable. Fried okra and gumbo are two of the South's signature recipes. The slime is key in providing something sticky for the delicious cornmeal coating on fried okra and is an important thickener in traditional stews and gumbo.

As I grew older and started venturing into the wide world of food, I found that okra is an important ingredient in the cuisines of Africa, India and the Middle East. Tasting the recipes made me realize that the humble pod I picked in that hot Tennessee bottomland had an adventurous and exotic story. That made me feel adventurous and exotic for knowing about it.

Now I am an adult, well-versed in Southern food culture, yet it is just now that I find out, from my favorite Southern plantsman, Ryan Gainey, that okra (*abelmoschus esculentus*, a.k.a. *hibiscus esculentus*) is kin to cotton, hollyhock, hibiscus and mallow. Incredible to discover, but it totally makes sense because the flowers are similar. Digging deeper, I find that mallow was used in the development of marshmallows. That same slime that so many folks hate about okra was extracted from the mallow plant and used to thicken a sugar mixture to make marshmallows. In fact, the mallow often grew in marshy areas, which is why we call the candy, "marshmallow." Think about that next time you open a bag to make s'mores.

HOW TO PICK OKRA:

Wear gloves and carry a knife.

HOW TO BUY OKRA:

Choose pods that are small (from 2-3 inches long) and are uniformly green. Okra begins to turn dark along the ribs and stem end when it has been sitting around too long.

Most of the Atlanta area's organic farmers sell okra that is fantastic. Look for the familiar green variety but also the lovely "scarlet" okra.

ANGIE'S SOUTHERN PAN-FRIED OKRA

This is not the heavily breaded, deep-fried okra you may be used to. This technique produces a crispy-on-the-outside, almost caramelized shell that yields to a very tender interior that maintains the okra flavor. I learned this from my Tennessee grandmother, Pauline Bradley, who sprinkles a bit of sugar and also throws in one cut up green tomato. (In fact, you can use this same coating to make pan-fried green tomatoes). Sprinkled with salt after frying, this could almost be eaten like popcorn. In fact, it would make a brilliant bar snack.

Serves 4-6

2 lbs. small okra, (2-3 inches long), stem ends trimmed, sliced into 1/4 inch "wheels." (Very important: Do not wash the cut okra! You need the slime to make the breading stick.)	1/2 cup all-purpose flour
1 cup cornmeal	1 tsp. cayenne pepper
	1 tsp. salt
	6 hearty grinds of black pepper
	1/2 tsp. sugar
	Vegetable or peanut oil for frying

In a shallow pan or baking dish/tray, mix the cornmeal, flour, cayenne pepper, salt, black pepper and sugar all together. Dump the cut up okra into the cornmeal mixture and toss with your hands ensuring that each little "wheel" is coated on all sides. Next coat the bottom of a cast-iron skillet with oil (about 1/4-inch deep) and place over medium-high heat. The oil is hot enough when a couple drops of water flicked into the pan begin to spatter. Carefully pick up handfuls of the coated okra (shaking a bit to remove excess breading) and gently drop into the oil. Don't crowd the pan! The okra should not mound up in the pan, it should be frying in a single layer with a bit of room around the pieces for even frying. Allow the okra to fry for about 3-5 minutes and then turn them gently to fry on the other side. Try to avoid stirring the bits or turning them too many times. Fry until medium-golden brown and, using a slotted spatula, place them on a tray lined with paper towels or a brown paper bag to soak up the excess grease. Again, put them in a single layer, avoiding a pile up that would make the bottom layer soggy. Salt to taste. Serve immediately.

