

Take the fear out of making a roux:

By Joe Crea
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Mention the word *roux* and many savvy cooks otherwise seasoned in New Orleans cookery react with the same trembling reverence usually reserved for voodoo.

Roux plays a central role in Louisiana cuisine. Since it largely accounts for that peculiar, smouldering depth of flavor associated with Cajun and Creole cookery, all that mystique makes sense.

Basically, roux is the same thickener used in many classic continental cuisines. Traditional French cooks blend fat and flour before adding the mixture to stews and sauces. The smooth "cream" produces a lump-free sauce.

That's where the similarity ends. Where the French generally use butter, often rubbing it together with flour to form little balls that are dropped into the hot liquid until the desired thickness is achieved, Louisianans take a different tack.

Creole and Cajun cooks may use butter, but just as often substitute olive or vegetable oil, bacon fat or other drippings. In turn, they cook the mixture to various degrees of color — from a medium gold to a nearly black mahogany brown.

"People think it's really hard to make roux and it really isn't," said Lois Harrell, owner of Beignets restaurant.

Different people make it differently, she said, but one thing is clear: The secret is in the cooking.

"You cook it long and slow — and *c-a-r-e-f-u-l-l-y*," she said.

Mrs. Harrell makes the thickener ahead of time. "It takes a long time, and if you try to rush it, it plain burns," she said.

"However much you want it dark, cook it slow. You want it to get that rich, nutty smell. It smells like nuts when you're done with it — if you've cooked it correctly. It smells so good, you almost want to spread it on bread."

Here's how Mrs. Harrell prepares and uses roux.

Louisiana roux

1 stick plus 2 tablespoons butter (not margarine)
About ¾ cup white flour

You must watch this carefully as you make it, stirring often.

In a heavy pan over high heat, melt the butter and allow it to sizzle for about 1 minute. Add ½ cup of the flour and stir it thoroughly. Work in the remaining flour, stir thoroughly and reduce heat to a medium-low flame.

"Then just let it stay," Mrs. Harrell said. "But you've got to watch it, or else it burns."



Lois Harrell

Gives tips for making a roux

Cooking time ranges from about 30 minutes to as much as 2 hours. You can go on with other cooking tasks, but keep a watchful eye, making sure the flame is moderately low and the mixture doesn't scorch. Stir the mixture occasionally.

A "light" roux, according to Mrs. Harrell's recipe, takes about 30 minutes of slow, careful cooking. Sniff and taste a dab occasionally, in search of a nutty flavor.

Light roux has achieved a medium golden brown color — about the color of cinnamon or fresh, shelled pecan skins. It has an ever-so-barely burnt fragrance and a decidedly nutty flavor.

For a "dark" roux, let the mixture cook longer — at least 45 to 60 minutes. Dark roux is the color of regular roasted coffee beans. It will have a stronger flavor and fragrance. There will be a vaguely acrid flavor and a distinct toasted-nut taste.

How dark to cook it depends on what dish you're preparing, Mrs. Harrell said.

Use a lighter roux for chicken jambalaya or seafood dishes where you would prefer a pale, golden brown sauce.

"If it's for beef burgundy or a stew with sausage and ham, which should be dark and rich, I'd cook the roux longer," she said.

You can use the roux — cooked to your own taste — in any number of dishes. As an example, here's an easy stew recipe to get you started.

Creole chicken or rabbit stew

4-pound stewing hen or rabbit, cut into serving portions
Flour to dredge the meat
3 tablespoons olive oil; more if necessary
¾ cup chopped scallions, green tops and all
2 teaspoons minced, crushed fresh garlic
½ to ¾ cup chopped yellow onion
1 cup chopped celery
Roux, cooked to whatever color you like
1½ to 2 quarts chicken stock
Salt, pepper to taste
Hot cooked white rice

In a heavy Dutch oven, heat the olive oil over a high flame. Quickly brown the meat on all sides in the hot fat, then remove to a dish and keep warm.

Add the garlic, scallions, onion and celery to the fat (add a little extra fat if necessary) and brown vegetables about 3 minutes. Stir in ½ cup of roux, pour in 2 quarts of chicken stock and return the meat to the pot. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Simmer about 1½ hours for chicken, 2 to 2½ hours for rabbit. Towards the end of cooking, if you want the gravy thicker, add a little extra roux.

Serve the stew over hot cooked rice. Yield: 4 to 8.

Chicken jambalaya

2 pounds skinless, boneless chicken breasts
3 or 4 tablespoons butter or olive oil
About ½ cup chopped celery
1 large onion, chopped
1 clove garlic
About ¼ cup roux to start; more later, if desired
About 6 cups homemade chicken stock or bouillon from cubes
2 bay leaves
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
Salt to taste
A dash of oregano
1½ teaspoons parsley flakes
Hot cooked rice, about 4 cups total

Cut chicken into chunks. Heat oil in a heavy Dutch oven and brown the chicken parts, then remove to a dish. Add the celery and onion and saute for about 2 minutes. Add the garlic and cook another minute, but do not brown. Add about ¼ cup roux and stock. Add seasonings and simmer 30 to 45 minutes.

If you like, thicken the jambalaya with additional roux — add a little at a time, stirring until sauce thickens.

Serve over hot cooked rice. Yield: 6 to 8 servings.