

# Understanding distilled spirits

by Justin King



It was the accidental discovery of the process of fermentation that allowed man to create the first beverages containing alcohol. Fermentation can occur naturally when two necessary ingredients, carbohydrate and yeast, are available and interact. This is the most important part of the process for wine and beer.

Distilled spirits involve the extra step of distilling, which reduces the original water content and greatly increases the alcoholic strength. Beer on average has an alcohol content ranging from 2% to 8% and wines from 8% to 14%. Distilled spirits are usually in the range of 35% to 50% alcohol. These distilled products include vodka, rum, tequila, American whiskey, Canadian whiskey, Scotch whiskey, Irish whiskey, brandy and cognac, cordials and liquors.

The raw materials used for making a distilled spirit are of two basic types: those containing a high concentration of natural sugars and those containing other carbohydrates that can easily be converted to sugars by enzymes. Sugary materials include grapes, sugarcane, agave, molasses and sugar. Commonly used starchy materials include corn, rye, rice, barley, wheat and potatoes. From these basic ingredients, there is a vast variety of tastes that can be mixed into a wider variety making for an exciting adventure.

If you feel you need qualified advice occasionally or might

simply be ready to start on your adventure to gain new experiences, choose an outlet that can provide you with knowledge of the products, rather than an outlet who simply sells.

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## Ode to gumbo

by Linda Allen

Up early in the dark, in the January cold. Up early with the full moon swinging from the branches of the oak tree, the frost crunching silver underfoot. Up early with dreams of gumbo shadowing my sleep.

Inside the warmth of the kitchen, with daylight still missing, I reach for the papery skin of onions, for green peppers and celery. I feel the need to chop and stir, to fry and simmer. I feel the need for gumbo.

Coming into February, it's always this way. Maybe it's an antidote for winter, a cure for the excess of the holidays, shades of red and green receding into December. Maybe it's anticipation of Mardi Gras, a longing for Jolie Blonde, for the abandon of New Orleans.

Whatever the source, it comes on strong this season, and I perch on the kitchen stool in the early hours and chop vegetables until my arm aches. I brown the floured chicken, nibbling at the crusty corners, reasoning unreasonably with my New Year's resolution to lose weight.

And then I face the roux. To me, it's a little like playing chicken. I stir the flour, spicy with garlic and cayenne, into the hot oil and watch it darken. At this point, I am committed to stirring. I do not leave the flame. I barely answer questions if anyone is foolish enough to ask me one. Riveted to the roux, I watch it take on the shades of night, pushing it darker and darker with my spatula

willing it not to burn, wondering just how far to go before I rescue it with the chopped vegetables and it deepens to the color of river mud. Black satin napalm, slow burn mystery, foreign words on a familiar tongue.

Breathing again, I stir the roux into the broth, float the chicken, the okra and tomato in its black sea, punctuate the dream with Tabasco. Then simmer, slow simmer song, low flame. Simmer.

Waiting is a winter game, but worth the cold. Fluff the white rice. Drown it in the dark broth, in the voodoo and the smoke. Inhale life's complexity. Drink it in.

There you go. Gumbo!

*Linda Allen is the owner of Linda Allen Catering and Linda's Fine Food to Go. Located at 500 FM 2325 in Wimberley, Linda's Fine Food to Go offers a wide selection of carry-out items and entertains special orders. Linda Allen Catering has offered full service catering to the Hill Country for 15 years. Call her at 512-847-5464.*

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