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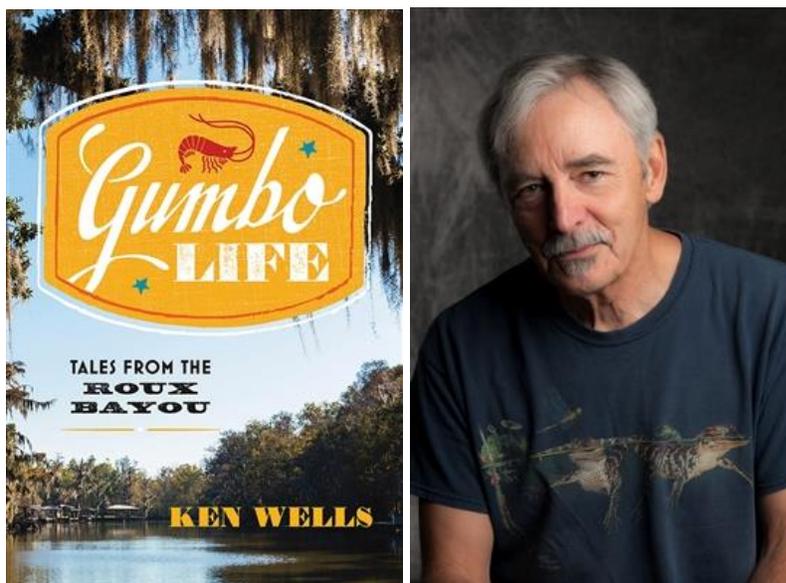
AUTHOR AND EDUCATOR

Gumbo Life: Tales from the Roux Bayou

By Ken Wells

A Book Review by
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During the Christmas Holidays, my daughter and son-in-law from Houston, Texas, hosted a lunch at their home and it included a dear friend of theirs, an elderly Japanese-American they considered their Aunt. At the time, this kind and wonderful woman was battling cancer, receiving treatment, and suffering from an inability to eat anything. It is a tragic, though common, story of inescapable pain and suffering. On that day, my daughter served seafood gumbo; a wonderful brew of crabmeat and shrimp in a roux-based broth my wife taught her how to make. For the first time in a while, this Aunt enjoyed eating and subsequently claimed that she was able to digest the dish and, more importantly, it made her feel much better. She even appended the Gumbo with her own ethnic accoutrements—and made it even better. Another of their friends, an African American they called their Uncle, heard about that

medicinal success, and since he was battling the same disease and having the same issues, tried my daughter's Gumbo. The result was the same. He was able to eat and it made him feel better. Since then, my daughter and son-in-law, who is originally from Brazil, have had it delivered to their "Aunt" and "Uncle"—so that they can eat and feel better.

Stories like that connect love, family, and Gumbo. As Wells writes, it "... transcends race, class, religion, and politics." Gumbo has been consumed by some of the most impoverished *and* some of the most powerful people on Earth. It has been served in gas stations and five-star restaurants. There is something hugely egalitarian and democratic about Gumbo and that is the kind of *Gumbo Life* Ken Wells writes about. That is only possible, of course, because Gumbo has no standard definition; it is nimble enough to be whatever tastes good for a given palate in a given place. People make "good Gumbos" because they are specifically making what they want to eat. It is also why attempts to trace the historical roots of Gumbo are futile. It is like trying to interpret those DNA reports—you find out you are from almost everywhere and can connect to almost anyone—and as a result, even though it is all about your individuality, you actually learn very little about yourself. As it turns out, Gumbo's DNA contains influences from France, Africa, Spain, Acadie, Germany, Italy, and the United States. It is called the Theory of Seven Nations and as time marches on, Gumbo is getting better because new influences are introduced with each new generation. There is no chauvinism in the *Gumbo Life*: the seven nations, and those yet to come, only care about making a better Gumbo.

While it is impossible to determine the origin of anything as ill-defined as Gumbo, Ken Wells takes us on a delightful ride and it is worth reading every word of it. It is like a saying I once heard where I grew up in Cajun Louisiana: "We don't know where we are going but we are making good time!" Wells is hugely successful in breaking down Gumbo into its component parts, like roux, peppers, okra, the "trinity," the meats or seafood, and identifying those origins—or at least the first known ethnicities to make use of those elements. His treatment of "gombeau" being cooked in Louisiana by runaway slaves, before the arrival of the Acadians, is masterful and long overdue. And yet, roux, which most people would consider the foundation of a modern Gumbo, is unquestionably French. Throw in the Spanish and Native American contributions that made Gumbo "...earthier and spicier than the cuisine..." and the German contribution of sausage and smoked meats, and you have a dish that belongs to everyone. That's why it makes us all happy and feel good when we eat it.

Well, it makes us happy *when* we eat it. While the Gumbo is being cooked, however, I've witnessed heated arguments over what is "good" in a Gumbo. I can't remember how many times I've heard,

"You not gonna put that in your gumbo!"

"Why not?"

"Cause it's not gonna be good."

"Aww... you don't know what's good."

"Go ahead, put it in there if you want, but it's not gonna be good."

It's really bad to have "too many spoons in a Gumbo" during its preparation. It leads to arguments as emotional as debating the Trump Presidency. I once tried to add garlic in a Gumbo of mine and the

reaction throughout the kitchen was one of abject horror. I've since learned that in a Cajun home the trick is to not let anyone actually see what you are doing. Do it! They gonna like it!

I especially liked Wells' treatment of the what is, and is not, a Gumbo. Like Wells, I never understood what completely disqualified scaled fish from the Gumbo circle. Or why it is impossible to envision a mixture of chicken/sausage and seafood in the same Gumbo pot. (If served at the same time it had better be segregated into two pots or there will be trouble.) Even better is his treatment of the "rules." There are rules!! Don't put tomatoes in a Gumbo!! As I read Wells' book, I saw violations of the rules I grew up with on the Prairie Side of the land of the Cajuns. (Ken is from the Swamp Side.) I don't remember my mother or grandmother putting celery in a gumbo in my house. And as a matter of personal preference, I think okra is pretty gross. To this day, before ordering Gumbo in any restaurant or gas station, I ask if there is okra in it. Often the waiter proudly answers in the affirmative and I'll respond, "Then I don't want it." Most of the time the waiter leaves befuddled and bewildered. And finally, I never thought *filé* did anything—it was just something you "put in there."

Beyond a meal, Gumbo is a social event in Cajun households like Wells and mine. We waited for the first cool spell in order to have our first Gumbo of the season. It is another one of those rules: You can't eat Gumbo unless it's cool outside! Who decided that, anyway? (It's alright to bar-be-que chicken over a bed of glowing charcoals in 100-degree heat but making a Gumbo in an air-conditioned kitchen is unacceptable? Really? Go figure.) And, in our current Age of Enlightenment, it's alright for a *man* to cook a Gumbo (or anything else) in a Cajun home... as long as danger, like a cauldron of boiling Gumbo, is involved.

So, Ken Wells wrote an excellent book about a delicacy that has no standard recipe or definition. A dish that is clearly the product of hundreds of years of evolution and influences from dozens of cultures—each, by the way, making this delicacy better than before. Gumbo is a splendid example of the benefits of culinary diversity, an absence of prejudice and bigotry, and a purely market-driven phenomenon based entirely on—flavor. And yet, it is malleable enough for each of us to make it our own.

As a social phenomenon Gumbo doesn't make any sense, but it sure would be nice if everything else that touches us, like our culture, economy, and politics, could be more like Ken Wells' *Gumbo Life*.

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