OKRA IS AFRICA’S CULINARY totem. It originated on the continent and made its way around the world. Nowadays, it is a common ingredient in India, Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, South America, and the American South, where it is famously added to gumbos to thicken them. This simple dish of stewed okra and tomatoes is one of the all-purpose side dishes of African American cuisine. Although it tastes best when fresh okra, available in late summer and early fall, is used, frozen okra can be substituted other times of the year.

6 large vine-ripened tomatoes, or 3 (15-ounce) cans diced tomatoes, drained ½ cup celery, diced 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped 1 teaspoon kosher salt ½ cup Vegetable Stock (page 201) 4 cups fresh or frozen okra, cut into ⅛-inch-thick rounds Freshly ground black pepper

If using fresh tomatoes, first peel them. Fill a medium stockpot with cold water and bring to a boil. Prepare a large bowl of ice water. With a paring knife, remove the core from each tomato and cut a quarter-sized X in the skin of the tomato bottom. Place the tomatoes in the boiling water for 30 seconds, then, using a slotted spoon, transfer them to the bowl of ice water. Let cool, then gently remove the skin. Dice the peeled tomatoes. You should have 4 cups.

Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan over high heat. Add the onion and cook until tender and translucent, about 2 to 3 minutes. Add the jalapeño, celery, garlic, and salt and cook for 1 minute longer.

Now add the tomatoes and Vegetable Stock and gently simmer for 15 minutes.

Next add the okra and simmer until tender, about 25 minutes longer.

Adjust the seasoning to taste with salt and pepper before serving.