



**Jo Mudd, enjoying her 'Best Gumbo' title with Tim Blanton, Executive Director, Episcopal Place, at Gumbo Gala 2009**

## **The People: Gumbo Gala 2010**

What follows is an interview with **Jo Mudd**, who was 2009 “Best Gumbo in Birmingham” winner in the “Professionals” category. Jo will defend her title at Gumbo Gala 2010, which will be Saturday, May 8, in Caldwell Park, beginning at 11 a.m.

Jo owns Muddbug’s Gourmet Foods in Vincent, Ala. Muddbug’s products such as gumbo base, crispy cheese straws, and granola, are sold in Piggly Wiggly stores in Birmingham and some Western Supermarkets. Jo also runs Jo Jo’s Catering, where customers can sample her award-winning gumbo, which she describes on the website like this: *“A Gulf Coast-style gumbo with a hand-stirred roux the color of pecans, chicken, Conecuh sausage (made in Conecuh County, Ala.), homemade chicken stock, not that stuff from a can or a jar, and the right blends of seasoning, making it not too hot but not too mild. In true New Orleans fashion, I add okra and tomatoes, because, as you know, it ain’t gumbo unless there is okra.”*

By Tabitha J Lacy

### **When was the first time you made gumbo?**

I don’t know. I grew up with it. I grew up near Mobile. It is something I grew up with my Mom making it.

### **Did your mother cook gumbo a lot?**

It was more like a special treat because it took my mother all day to make it. Usually, she would make it after we went to see my grandfather. My grandfather lived at Pirate’s Cove, near Josephine, Ala., on the Gulf Coast. He’d go out shrimping and crabbing. When he had a good supply, we would drive down from Jackson, Ala., and visit, and my mom would make big batches of gumbo. She would freeze it for folks to take home.

### **How did she learn to make it?**

I don’t know. She just did. She grew up even closer to Mobile. Maybe she learned it from her half sister.

**Is gumbo a Mobile tradition, too? I always think New Orleans?**

I think Gumbo is more of a Gulf Coast tradition. It was brought over by African slaves, and there are French and Spanish influences to it. But it's more African ... The word "gumba" means good.

**What do you remember about your Mom cooking it?**

I can remember the roux cooking in the house ... and the smell. It smells kind of a nutty. She would make gallons and gallons. It wasn't that she made a little pot of gumbo. That's not how it works. Put her name in here. It's Shirley Mudd. She'd like that.

**Does she still make gumbo?**

No, she's getting up in years.

**So now you share your gumbo with her?**

Yes (pause). Of course, hers is always better.

**So tell me about the gumbo that you sell in stores?**

I make a gumbo base; it's called Muddbug's Gourmet Foods Gumbo Base: It's got everything in it but the meat. So it has chicken stock made from scratch, okra, the trinity (onions, celery and bell pepper), tomatoes, everything. You just add whatever meat you want: seafood, chicken, sausage.

**Where can I buy that?**

At the Birmingham Piggly Wiggly stores and some Western stores (Rocky Ridge and Mountain Brook).

**How long has your business been open?**

I've been doing that about three years. I make it in a former restaurant kitchen and sell it to area grocery stores. I bought an old restaurant -- it was an old meat-and-three place -- and I only use it as a commercial kitchen.

*(It turns out that Jo is in her commercial kitchen when the interviewer calls, at 10:30 a.m. on a Wednesday, and she has just started a batch of roux.)*

I'm making roux right now. I'm back here stirring. I make it in 20-pound batches.

**So what's the secret to a good roux?**

Patience ... taking your time with the roux, making sure you don't burn it.

**Do you bake your roux? I knew a New Orleans chef that said that was her secret.**

I cook mine on the stovetop. I mean, all roux is is fat and flour. So if you tasted it by itself, it'd taste like cooked flour ... browned flour. Some people will do it with oil and flour, and brown it that way. I actually brown my flour dry and add the oil to it. I make anywhere from 12 up to 30 gallons. It takes about three hours.

**So it's a three-hour commitment of you standing by the stove?**

Yes. Pretty much. Off and on. When it gets to the browning stage, you have to babysit it. If it burns, you have to throw it away and start all over.

**So do you make lots of gumbo at home?**

My husband complains that I don't. I make it so much that I don't crave it. He would eat it every week.

**So how did it come about that you entered the Gumbo Gala contest?**

I had a friend of mine tell me about it, and I contacted them (Episcopal Place). We had a great time. I brought my husband and a friend, and I competed in the professional category.

**You were competing against some top restaurant chefs. Were you surprised that you won?**

Yes. I was shocked.

**Did you get to taste other contestants' gumbo?**

Yes. I got to sample several. I thought everybody's was good. Gumbo is unique to the person. It's one of those things that is very specialized toward the person. It is hard to say, "This is better, or "that is better," 'cause it's all good.

**How many professional teams were there?**

5-6 teams.

**Why did you think yours won?**

I think the judges liked mine the best.

For the competition, I pumped the heat up a bit. You can always add heat, but you can't take it away. There are those that eat it where it peels the taste buds off their tongues. Others like a little spice. I temper mine a little bit. I make my own Cajun spice blend. I make the chicken stock from the bones. I try to make it as true to homemade ... actually it is homemade, I've just made it in a commercial kitchen.

**Why is that important to you?**

I think it comes out in the flavor and comes out in the taste. You can tell when it's been mass produced. With gumbo, it's time, patience, care and love. It's just something you do because you love to do it.

**So how did your business venture come about?** My sister, one Christmas we all got together, and she had my cheese straws, and she said, "You ought to sell these." Well, I thought that if I was going to do that, I'm also going to do gumbo.

Andy Virciglio, (a fourth-generation grocer) who owns the Piggly Wiggly stores, he really helps local people out. I asked him, "Can you give me a chance?" And he said, "Come and do some tastings, and if the people like it, I'll carry it."

I take samples to the stores, and people will try it, and they buy it like crazy.

It's been doing very, very well. I'm hoping to step up production and get into a larger market. I am going to the Food Expo in Texas. I'm hoping to pick up some hotels or casinos. It's a lot of work getting into grocery stores. It took about a year. And I'm the chief cook and bottle washer — it's just me.

**So the gumbo base that you sell is all from scratch?**

There are no artificial colors or preservatives. I just don't believe in having to add all that extra stuff.

**So do you think you'll have a shot at winning again?**

It's up to the judges. What some people like, others don't like. I had stiff competition last year. Everybody was having a lot of fun.

**The event is great fun, and a way to help seniors and adults with special needs be able to live affordably in a safe, caring environment at Episcopal Place.**

Yes. It's for a great cause. We got to meet some of the seniors. We got to talk with them and know them. That was fun. My husband, Craig (Spradley), is psyched about coming back. He parked his motorcycle at my tent last year to try to attract attention. And he is inviting all of his motorcycle friends to come this year. I plan on having a good time.

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Jo's website is [www.muddbugsgourmetfood.com](http://www.muddbugsgourmetfood.com)

*Tabitha J Lacy owns TJ Lacy Media Consulting Services, which provides writing and editing services to clients, as well as an insider's perspective on the news media. She is the former assistant managing editor of the Birmingham Post-Herald, a daily newspaper that ceased publishing in 2005.*