

Gourmet

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AN ONION WITH ATTITUDE

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED APRIL 2000

In the Catskill and Appalachian mountains, ramps are the first sign of spring. Ann Hodgman looks into their raffish history.

For a long time, spring in the Catskills is nothing but gray. The area's glaciated soil is rocky, acid, and inhospitable, and the air still too mean for most plants to stick their necks out into. But ramps aren't afraid to grow.

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Days before the leaves are on the trees, the ramps' sturdy green tells woodlanders that spring is really on its way. And weeks before suburban gardeners start their annuals from seed, New York farmer and forager Rick Bishop is already searching the hillsides for the hardy plant *Allium tricoccum*, also known as wild leeks or Easter onions.

Bishop, who at the age of seven managed to turn every inch of his family's lawn into a garden and now owns Mountain Sweet Berry Farm, in Roscoe in upstate New York, tracks down ramps, fiddlehead ferns, and other forageables for Manhattan's Union Square Greenmarket and dozens of New York City's best restaurants.

But even with the growing popularity of ramps in restaurants, you may not have heard of them unless you're from ramp country—in the Catskills or parts of the Appalachians. They're a staple of spring cooking in the mountains, and they have a long, raffish history. Although they're members of the same family as onions, ramps don't look much like onions—or leeks, for that matter. About ten inches tall, the vegetable has two broad, smooth, spear-shaped green leaves and white scallion-size bulbs. They can be found in cool mountainous regions throughout the eastern United States, in parts of the Midwest, and as far north as Canada from March to May. Hot weather finishes them off. By the time they put out seed pods, they're usually inedible.

No one knows how ramps got their name. Actually, a lot of people know, but they all know different things. Some suggest that *ramp* reflects the “tramp” you have to take through the woods to find the plants, while others think that because ramps grow under the sign of Aries (the ram), the word derives from “Son of Ram.” Cute ideas, but we probably don't need to look much further than the fact that the Old English word *hramsa* means “wild garlic.”

On the other hand, everyone seems to agree that ramps—raw ones, especially—taste and smell much, *much*

stronger than leeks. You can smell ramps growing from a long way off: They're one of the strongest vegetables of the onion persuasion, a group that has plenty of opinionated members already. They can be cultivated easily, but they'll never taste tame. In ramp-growing areas, bad boys in school sometimes eat raw ones on purpose, hoping their ramp breath will get them sent home early. Once, to publicize a ramp festival in West Virginia, a newspaper editor produced a "ramp edition" printed with ramp-scented ink. Postal workers got so cross about the smell that the editor got an official scolding from Washington: "It is beyond the call of duty for any postmaster to accept offensive pieces."

Competition for the most overwrought ramp description is even fiercer than the scuffle over the name. "Garlic with attitude" and "leeks with a reek" are two of the politer ramp epithets. One writer compared the taste to "a combination of goat sweat, sour milk, and battery acid." Such unflattering characterizations are not new. In 1660 a rather hysterical European writer named Nicolas Perrot described his symptoms after eating a mess of ramps in America: "You feel a load on your chest, your belly is as hard as a drum and [you have] colic pains which last two or three days."

Given the lives of the early American colonists, Perrot was probably eating ramps after an entire winter in which he had tasted not one green thing. As the first edible—and abundant—vegetable of spring, ramps must have been easy to overdo. That would cause stomach problems in the best of us (and, perhaps, the bears and wild boars that also forage for ramps to this day).

Actually, most of the early Americans who could get ramps—colonists and natives alike—considered them a spring tonic after months of preserved food.

As for their flavor, dozens of spring ramp festivals, where the wild leeks are served in every possible way, testify that ramps don't taste all *that* much like battery acid. "They're garlicky and oniony," Bishop says, "but they add a deep richness that's better than onion. They're very robust."

Ramps are also hard to gather. As Bishop says, they don't exactly "jump into the truck." For one thing, he can't usually *get* his truck any closer than 500 feet away from most of the ramp patches he visits. He needs a pitchfork to get under the tangled roots of each plant, and he needs to give them a scrupulous cleaning before they're restaurant-ready. "You have to wash them white, like leeks, and there's a slimy coating on the bottom that you have to peel back. Then we have to hose them off. Old-timers used to throw them in the creek overnight."

The plant's intense taste means a little can go a long way. Probably the best introduction for the neophyte, says Bishop, is to chop some ramp leaves, stir-fry them in a little olive oil, and serve them over pasta. They can also be made into vichyssoise, stuffed into the body cavity of brook trout or chicken, and turned into a gratin with potatoes and cheese. Gourmet's kitchen came up with a terrific chicken dish with ramps, as well as a spaghetti and ramps recipe that has become one of the cooks' favorites. Ramp jelly is probably an acquired taste, but it's traditional at some ramp festivals.

Bishop clearly loves the days he spends foraging. "In the spring, ramps cover the ground like a carpet," he says. "There's one bend in the river near me where the entire mountainside is covered with ramps. Little trout lilies are coming up then, and the wild turkeys are out. There's a sort of insanity about ramps—people get so excited when they see them. Spring is here!"

keywords ramps, spring, produce, ann hodgman, new york

