

FOOD BIO:

Ramps

(Allium tricoccum)

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Illustration by Tom Mosser

a. The first sign of spring

Wild leeks can be found growing from Canada to South Carolina and as far west as Iowa. Locally known as ramps, this hardy and flavorful woodland herb has a rich and pungent history rooted throughout the Appalachian Mountain and Plateau regions. The appearance of its bright green leaves thrusting through the moist soils of the still-slumbering woodlands signifies the start of spring and kicks off ramp festivals and suppers throughout the mountain communities of Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Kentucky, South Carolina and West Virginia. The festivities begin in April and carry on well into May.

b. The stink of it

Fully edible -- from the bulbous white root to its broad, sword-like leaves -- the taste of ramps can be described as a mellifluous combination of strong garlic and onions, hinting at shallots and chives; and a distinctive odor to match. Lovingly referred to as "little stinkers" in Richwood, West Virginia -- the Ramp Capital of the World -- ramps are prepared in a variety of ways: scrambled with eggs or fried in bacon grease or even eaten raw in a "ramp sandwich" or salad. However, be warned that those who indulge in raw ramps will be doomed to don an especially long-lasting stench!

c. Medicinal properties

Ramps were coveted by Native Americans and pioneer settlers; not only did they use the bulbs and leaves to spice up bland winter fare, they also relied on the plant as an herbal remedy for a variety of ailments. Ramp leaves are rich in nutrients; including lutein, magnesium, calcium, and vitamins A and C and are known to be diuretic, laxative and antiseptic. Taken as a spring tonic to clean the blood, the juice from crushed ramps can soothe bee stings and even treat the common cold. American folklore has it that eating leeks can protect people against evil, and it's been said that when a man and a woman share a meal of ramps with each other, they might just fall in love.

d. The cost of fame

Wild leeks are probably the most sought-after member of the onion family (Alliaceae). In fact, they're considered a trendy delicacy in fine restaurants and specialty groceries and can cost up to \$15 a pound. Many special attributes set the ramp apart from its wild cousins; but it's that pervasive, distinctive stench married to the most delectable flavor that makes this plant the topic of heated debate: is the stench worth the taste? Popularity of the ramp would suggest that it's too good to pass up. In fact, some states have had to pass legislation to protect ramps from becoming over-harvested.

e. Celebration sensation

The best-known ramp festivals take place a few hours south of Pittsburgh, in the West Virginia communities of Pickens, Elkins, Helvetia, and the aforementioned Richwood; home of the National Ramp Association and the only known ramp farm in the world.

f. Where the ramps are

When provided with an abundance of moist, nutrient-rich soil, *allium tricoccum* can grow under a variety of environmental conditions; but they are most likely found under a forest canopy of beech, sugar maple, birch, poplar, hickory, oak, linden, and buckeye. Start looking for the tell-tale green shoots as early as February and harvest plants that sport two or three robust green leaves. Ramps grow in dense colonies, and the bulbs can be long and slender (similar to the green onion) if growing in sandy, loamy soil; or bulbous and stout, when growing on very rocky hillsides. Two varieties grow in tandem; some say the red-stemmed ramps are more pungent than the green-stemmed variety. Use a dandelion digger and a long knife to cut any tenacious root hairs, and transport your treasures in a cloth bag. Word of caution: ramps resemble lily-of-the-valley, but be careful not to confuse the two, because lily-of-the-valley is toxic.

