

Ramps, A Stinking Man's Food

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By Bob Batz Jr., Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The leaves are flat but not as wide as on ramps, or *Allium tricoccum*, so they could be another species or variety such as *burdickii*. Yes, we're talking about the wild leeks foraged in Brookville, Ohio, on Sunday - shown to the right.

Ramps are the unlikely cool kids of spring cuisine.

These scrawny little wild leeks, which reek, are prized by mountain folks and chefs alike as early harbingers of green, and seem to be increasingly celebrated from one side of the country to the other.

Here in Appalachia, we are in the heart of ramp country, and lots of people here literally dig them. Last week, Sean Ehland, executive chef at Kaya in the Strip District, was tweeting photos of ramp roll-ups with bacon and goat cheese, and now ramps are popping up all over the menu and other menus around town, as well as at Giant Eagle Market District stores and Whole Foods. Lidia's is celebrating Earth Day with a four-course ramps dinner on Fri., April 22 (\$40).



If you want to see what all the love is about, you might want to check out the Mason-Dixon Ramp Festival. The 21st fest runs from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, April 16 and 17, at Mason-Dixon Park near Mount Morris in Greene County, just off Interstate 79, about 65 miles south of Pittsburgh.

Saturday actually starts at 9 a.m. with "Diane's breakfast," and Sunday starts at 9 a.m. with an outdoor church service. There's music and crafters, prizes and raffles, antique engines and campers.

But the stinky stars of the show are the ramps, made every which way and into every kind of food by a dozen food vendors. There'll be beer-battered, deep-fried ramps, ramp salad, Mason-Dixon dogs (topped with fresh chopped ramps plus chili, coleslaw, sauerkraut and onions). There'll be ramp burgers, ramp kielbasa, fried potatoes and ramps, ramp butter and dips, and ramp cheese ball.

Organizer Connie Ammons says they'll go through more than 22 bushels of ramps.

You can even taste homemade ramp wine. It was made by Betty Quintana, a retired schoolteacher turned dairy goat farmer who lives between two 3,000-foot-tall wooded hills near Blacksburg, W.Va. She's got a "show patch" of leeks in her yard, and elsewhere on her property a "big patch," and she loves to go there when the leeks are ready in the spring with a piece of bread. "I pull them out of the ground, rinse 'em in the crick, and have a ramp sandwich immediately," she says. "My yearly, how shall I say it -- the way I celebrate."

Her love of ramps, as with a lot of folks, is, as she puts it, "a medicinal thing and a walk-in-the-woods thing."

She started coming to the ramp festival to pitch her nature walk business, but her skill as a home wine maker got her roped into making a batch of ramp wine, and now she gives out fizzy samples of it.

"It doesn't taste like any wine you've ever had," she says with a laugh, adding, "It's not bad."

You can learn to cook with ramps at demos by Washington County's "Ramp Man" Walter Danna, who's written a ramp cookbook. And there will be some non-ramped foods, such as maple syrup products, Uncle Jim's donuts and funnel cakes, baked goods including "salt-risen bread," cornbread and beans, fresh fries and onion rings, sweet sausage sandwiches, fudge, kettle corn, whiskey jams and jellies, canned peppers and salsa, and sassafras tea.

But they will be selling fresh ramps to bring home, too. Just plan on leaving your car windows down on the drive home.

To get there, take I-79 to Exit 1 at Mount Morris to Buckeye Road to Creek Road and go 1/2 mile to Mason-Dixon Park (1-304-879-5500 or masondixonpark.net). More info by calling 1-304-879-5372 or e-mailing keeperoftheland@aol.com.

Other ramp doings:

There are other ramp gatherings, big and small, but the mother of all "ramp feeds" is the one in Richwood, W.Va., "the Ramp Capital of the World," sponsored by the National Ramp Association. The 73rd Feast of the Ramson runs from 10:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on April 16 at the high school in Richwood, which is about 215 miles south of Pittsburgh.

Organizers note that such springtime "get togethers" were a tradition dating back to early settlers, who'd serve a "mess" of ramps with bear or venison, corn pone and other victuals, along with "lots of eatin' and greetin', buzzin' and gabbin', singing' and fiddlin'."

The event includes an art and craft show, music and dancers, and a Ramp Festival Queen. On the menu, besides ramps, are ham and bacon, potatoes and brown beans, corn bread and desserts, for \$15 per person or \$7 for children (advance purchases are discounted and folks who prepay get a special entrance). Details at 1-304-846-6790 or rwdchamber@frontier.com.

Find other dinners at Glenville, W.Va., native Anita Toth Simpson's website kingofstink.com.

Up north, the Westline Inn in Westline, McKean County, holds its big outdoor ramp festival on May 1. You can eat leek sausage and ham-and-leek sandwich, leek spread, leek soup and the Kinzua Trail Club's leek hotdogs. Enter the Leek Dip Contest for prizes and bragging rights. "Your breath will end up smelling like your dog's ..." Reserve a room, too, at 1-814-778-5103 (westlineinn.com).