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Ramps: Appalachian Delicacies that “Smells God-Awful, but Cures what Ails Ya”

Lisa J. Lefler

Michael Ann Williams’ wonderful book *Great Smoky Mountains Folklife* skillfully describes how important foodways¹ are in defining Smoky Mountain culture. Acknowledging the many changes that fast food and modernization have brought to the area in the last three decades, she still speaks to “meanings attached to specific foods and customs that surround them.” She also relays a multitude of stories from families’ memories of food grown, harvested, cooked, prepared, preserved, and shared. She says that “food still plays an important role in defining the past” (1995). And like people that I spoke with from Cherokee, North Carolina, and surrounding communities, many of the most inspired stories came from those about harvesting wild foods, particularly ramps. Foods were seasonal and generated memories that were associated with specific times of the year and with other events that made “putting up” and sharing foods important. This seasonal gathering was entangled with family and community identity and was part of being a mountain person or Indian.

Family Recollections about Ramps

As a young girl growing up in Western North Carolina, every spring, my father and I always excitedly anticipated one of the greatest gifts the mountains had to offer—ramps. This plant, a relative to

wild leeks, was the quest of our annual trek high up a steeply sloping mountain ravine whose location was a closely guarded family secret. However, in recent years, after my father had lost his leg and eyesight to diabetes, he shared his secret locations with those who would accompany him to gather these luscious delicacies. He would park his wheelchair at the top of the ravine where he could look down in our general vicinity and shout directions about where we should be looking and digging.

When our burlap sacks had been filled completely, we brought them home, washed them and cut off the long, green, lily-like tops outside the house, so as not to smell things up inside. We then brought the small but flavor-packed bulbs to mom so she could cut some of them up for a meal that day and put the rest up for our use the rest of the year. Some she would parboil and tightly wrap to put in the refrigerator for immediate consumption, but most she would freeze. In years past, dad would have them scrambled with eggs or squirrel brains, but the most preferred meal for our family was fried potatoes with ramps, along with fresh mountain trout. Sometimes we would invite friends and neighbors over and have a major fish fry complete with hushpuppies and coleslaw. After a long winter of potatoes, canned beans, and soup, ramps provided a tasty change, not to mention the tonic-like benefits mom told us they provided. Like onions, “they’re good for your heart,” she’d say.

I asked mom about the first time she’d ever eaten ramps, and she said her grandmother, Alma, had brought them over from high up Connelly’s Creek and introduced them to her dad’s family, and they began to grow them in a small patch above the fields. Interestingly though, she didn’t remember eating them until after she was married, at about nineteen years of age. She said her paternal Grandma Alma was of Cherokee descent, and her folks from Connelly’s Creek

ate them, but neither her mother nor maternal grandmother ever ate or talked about ramps.

I found this curious since ramps have long been harvested by the Cherokees, and white settlers knew about them not long after contact. Rattray (2003) states, “The word [*ramp*] is first mentioned in English print in 1530 but was used earlier by English immigrants of the Southern Appalachian Mountains.” Like my mother’s experience, even some Cherokees didn’t try ramps until they were young adults; specifically, those who didn’t grow up in Western North Carolina. One forty-six-year-old Cherokee woman remembers being introduced to ramps when she was a young adult. She was a self-identified “Airforce brat” and had come back to Cherokee to live with her mother and matrilineal family when she was in her late teens. When asked about her experience with ramps, she was quick to tell me she had eaten ramps regularly for the past thirty years but remembers her first encounter with the “little, slimy, green wild plants.” She said when her family introduced her to them, she wasn’t about to eat those smelly things, but soon she became acquainted with their unusual flavor and was told of their medicinal properties. She said, “They smell god-awful, but they cure what ails ya.” Now she eats them and looks forward to their arrival every year in the very early spring.

She said the best way to prepare them is to parboil them and chop them up, and fry them with eggs or potatoes. To freeze them, just clean them really good and make sure they’re dry before “puttin’ ’em up.” Another Cherokee female, aged 28, relayed that her father had planted a ramp patch up the mountain behind their home. “He never would let anyone else in the patch, and since he died,” she said, “my brother is the only one allowed to go.” She remembered the ritual of having fresh ramps in the early spring, sometimes along with branch

lettuce. She said, “My mom would cut up a bowl of ramps, and then fix a bowl of branch lettuce, slice boiled eggs, and layer them on top of it with fried bacon—so crisp it was almost black, and then mom would pour the hot bacon grease on top to kill it. That was a great meal.”

In recent conversations with these women, just before presenting this paper at a Southern Anthropological Society conference, both mentioned that they had uncles who had already gone in early January to dig for ramps. They said the ramps were very young and green but still ready for digging. An unusually warm winter was cited as instigating the early harvest. Historically, Cherokees harvested ramps earlier than their white neighbors and ate the pungent tiny bulbs along with most of the green leaves. White families often waited till closer to Easter and usually didn’t eat too far up the green stalk.

Others with whom I spoke about harvesting ramps generally spoke fondly, even longingly, of years past and their fathers and uncles would take them to the ramp patch. One man, about sixty years of age, smiled and recounted the springtimes of his youth when his uncle would take him well up on the mountain to gather ramps:

We’d go way up Nantahala to a place that spread out wide between the ridges. I remember so clearly a stand of white oaks, and the ground was so dark and rich and soft, you could just reach down under those oaks and pull up a bunch of ramps, and then shake ’em real good, and the dirt would just fall off of ’em clean. You didn’t even have to wash ’em, you could eat ’em right then and there. That was the most beautiful place in the spring. The ramps would grow in one long field, and the wind would blow, and those big broad green leaves would just sway in waves. Sometimes we’d just get enough to cook that evening after going trout fishing, and my uncle

would cook it all up right there on the creek bank. Now that was good eatin’. Those were wonderful times.

I asked him if they ever “put up” or canned ramps, and he said, “Law, yea. We put up just about everything we grew or harvested, but there were also a lot of things we pickled. Mom pickled okra, beans, corn, beets, and ramps, just to name a few.” There were also stories about eating ramps so that you wouldn’t have to go to school. One man in his late fifties recounted a boy in his class who spent most of the early spring listening to their teacher from the hallway. “Yea, there were some who knew they wouldn’t have to go to class if they ate raw ramps. You could smell ’em a mile.”

Ramps as Medicine

One of the consistent themes referred to in these conversations is the medicinal properties of ramps. Most mentioned that ramps cleansed or strengthened the blood, while others would just say it was a spring tonic. The historic record shows that some Native peoples used them to treat bee stings and coughs and colds, specifically citing the Menomini who referred to ramps as *skunk plants*. The reference to a now famous city on Lake Michigan reflects this place originally as skunk place, or CicagaWuni [Chicago], a place where ramps are many (Birringer et al. 2002).

Four decades ago, the research of Zennie and Ogzewalla (1974) stated that ramps “compared with oranges, on a weight basis, had higher values of vitamin C.” Other studies have shown that ramps or *Alliums* are a good source of vitamin C and “prostaglandin A1—a fatty acid known to be therapeutic in the treatment of hypertension” (2002). Birringer et al. say that “studies have linked the genus to increases in the production of high-density lipoproteins, which in turn are believed to combat heart disease by reducing blood serum levels of cholesterol.”

A 2000 article by Whanger et al. stated that ramps (*Allium tricoccum*) contain selenium and concluded that “selenium-enriched ramps appear to have potential for the reduction of cancer in humans” (5723). In addition, it’s thought that the “allicin (diallylsulfide oxide) in ramps, which has antibiotic properties, has also been linked to reduced rates of cancer (Block 2005).

In other research, ramps have been found to “contain cepaenes, which function as antithrombotic agents,” (Calvey et al. 1998) and “flavonoids, and other antioxidants that are free-radical scavengers” (Crellin and Philpott 1990). As often happens, cultural beliefs about the healing qualities of wild plants, in this case—ramps—prove to bear true in scientific analyses.

Where are They?

A 1979 article by botanist Almut Jones shows that ramps can be found from the far-northeastern United States, just north of Maine, down the Appalachian Mountains, into northern Alabama and Georgia, across the northern Midwest, throughout the Great Lakes region, from Wisconsin, back down to Iowa. He identifies two varieties of ramps—*Allium tricoccum* and *Allium burdickii*, the former being “conspicuously larger,” with a difference in pigment and flowering (30). The distribution for *A. burdickii* is similar to *A. tricoccum*; however, Jones shows far fewer findings of *A. burdickii* along the Eastern Mountain ranges. A team of Forest Service botanists, led by Gary Kauffman (2001), conducted ramp research in the Southern Appalachian region in 2001 and found that “there is no consistent evidence available to verify the presence of *A. burdickii* in North Carolina as a species morphologically distinct from *A. tricoccum*.” *A. tricoccum* is considered to be the plant that was much earlier identified in writings about wild leeks and was introduced into English

gardens by 1770 (Jones 1979, 30). *A. burdickii* was identified in 1877 in Wisconsin and became the namesake of the naturalist who wrote about it—J. H. Burdick.

Only one person interviewed from Cherokee mentioned that there might be two different plants, only one of which they harvested for consumption. He said, “like most plants put here for us, there is a copy-cat plant that we shouldn’t use and one that we should.” In my past conversations with folks about medicinal plants in general, the consensus is that plants will “show themselves to those who know how to use them.” Cherokee elders Jerry Wolfe and Walker Calhoun have spoken about going out to harvest plants, and the “right” plant showing itself by shaking. They credit this also as a way to conserve these very precious, yet threatened, plants. On a locally made commercial video about Cherokee plants, Mr. Wolfe shows the proper way to harvest a ramp plant. He pulls up the plant until the bulb comes almost out of the ground, and then slices off the bulb at the root, allowing the root to remain protected in the ground. He says that most people just come in and pull them up without considering how not leaving the root will detrimentally impact future ramp harvests.

Overharvesting and improper harvesting have resulted in dramatic population decline of mountain ramps. A recent Forest Service report also indicated that changes in weather and elevation can also affect ramp abundance (Walker, Silletti, and White 2005). Ramps are usually found at elevations between 3500 ft. and just over 5000 ft. Since ramp patches are less available to traditional harvesters because of overdevelopment and a recent ban on ramp collecting in the National Park, many people are trying to seed their own ramp patches. The EBCI Agricultural Extension Office hands out hundreds of ramp “sets” each spring. Accessibility to private patches is often severely guarded by family members—and with good cause.

Ramp festivals have been a major social and cultural event every year in North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia. People drive hundreds of miles to attend every year, and some see it as a pilgrimage, or regional initiation for “foreigners” or outsiders of Appalachia. Local media, chambers of commerce, agencies for tourism, and national periodicals have all touted ramp festivals and ramp recipes in recent years. The exposure of ramps as a “mountain delicacy” has decidedly increased its demand. *Food Network TV* personalities like Emeril Lagasse and Rachael Ray have included ramps as a seasonal must-have for professional and amateur chefs. Top-chef restaurants in major US cities now offer ramps along with other exotic foods. Ramp recipes include fiddle heads, calamari, and truffles. The unique taste and powerful odor offer a different, yet enticing alternative to garlic, onions, or leeks.

As a result, ramps are being harvested in unparalleled numbers, much like the trend that occurred with mountain ginseng and goldenseal. The increased cost, reflecting marginal availability, as with Mountain icons—ginseng and white liquor—makes ramps almost too expensive for locals to purchase. Moonshine in the last two decades has risen from about \$20 to \$80 a gallon; ginseng can bring over \$500 a pound; and ramps can easily run \$40 a gallon—double the cost of only three or four years ago.

Websites can direct interested buyers to ramp farmers, primarily in West Virginia, where they can seasonally purchase cultivated ramps. Facemire, one of several distributors, was shipping ramps at almost \$20 a pound in 2003. Another grower listed eighteen restaurants in the Chicago area as regular customers.

Many locals see the limited availability of ramps as just another sign of encroachment upon and destruction of Appalachian living. Several people interviewed said they had to harvest in places they couldn't reveal, most being on National Park land, yet they were willing to take the risk.

So What Do We Do?

The question of ramp sustainability is now an important topic. Forest Service botanists are unsure that current levels of ramp harvests are sustainable. They know that there is a need to monitor ramp populations and continue research regarding population decline in specific areas. Others are working to create gardens or farms to satisfy increasing demands for this important wild plant.

One woman and entrepreneur from Graham County, North Carolina, recently received international recognition for her work in producing “slow foods.” Beverly Whitehead received a grant from the Cherokee Preservation Foundation to plant and process ramps for commercial sale. She has been very successful in marketing dehydrated ramps in ramp salt and ramp meal. She said, “Our bear hunters came up with the ideas. They traditionally take dried ramps and mix them with cornmeal to make cornbread in their camps. It’s a local idea, based on an old local tradition” (2007). I can personally attest to the high quality of her products and encourage readers to visit her website and include these products in their culinary repertoire.

As are others in the area, she is concerned about the wholesale extinction of ramps and has thought of a way to provide people with the product without threatening the future of mountain ramps. She has fifteen people working with her, and she is a great example of Mountain resiliency and adaptability in a global economy.

Conclusion

Time changes things everywhere. Much of what I grew up with in Southern Appalachia has long been bulldozed down and privatized. Gaining access to medicinal plants and wild foods is becoming more difficult. Even people who have settled in the region within the past two decades are horrified at what looks like wholesale destruction of the land at the hands of money-seeking developers. This month in my home county, a confrontation at the courthouse between the “haves and have nots” will decide on a moratorium on housing developments.

As I’ve witnessed through my parent’s difficult adjustment to changes in the land and the loss of much they knew as “Appalachian,” the memories and connection to traditional foods like ramps will always bring us home.

Note

1. Note that in this paper, I am using the term *foodways* to refer to the ideas and practices surrounding the location, preparation, and consumption of food by a specific group—be it a family, ethnic group, or nation. Note also that this paper is built around a course I taught in Fall 2006, which preceded the SAS meetings where I presented the paper. I have made a few improvements to the paper as I presented it but have kept the “flavor” of the original.

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