

Turnip Greens and Fatback

For fifty seven years I was a resident of Northern Illinois. My mom was a Nebraska native who settled in a German community. This led to some interesting combinations on her dinner table and I learned to cook at her elbow. None of this prepared me for my move to Virginia!

I met and married a native Virginian and things went along smoothly for the first couple of years. Oh, I chuckled at the practice of deviled eggs for Thanksgiving and heard references to “greens” but none of these things affected me. Then came the urge to shed my Yankee Transplant label and plant a garden in the red dirt of Virginia. I was used to Illinois’ black soil and doubted that a crop would grow. I warned Jim that I was a Midwesterner and did not know a thing about growing greens nor cooking them. He informed me that I was not a Northerner anymore and it was time that I learned.

After getting our “lawn mower man” to till up a section of the back lawn in August, Jim and I headed for Gary’s Garden Center to buy seed for the famous “greens”. Gary proved to be a real treasure and gave me detailed information on the best way to grow greens, suggesting that the finest possible choice for me would be turnip greens. He also told me that a typical Southern fall meal consisted of greens, cornbread, a hunk of meat, and several hard-boiled eggs. If you really wanted to serve a great meal, you needed to break that cornbread into a glass of buttermilk and eat it with a spoon. A special treat would be the inclusion of a lard sandwich. Oh, sure!

We bought the special turnip green seed and I planted them the very next afternoon. The package said a twenty foot row would be sufficient for a family of four so I figured that amount would do the two of us just fine. Besides, I just knew that the greens would grow back like leaf lettuce whenever I cut some of it. The rest of the package of seeds would keep nicely until next year. To keep our friendly herd of deer away from the plants, I spread black nylon netting over the entire crop.

The next morning the smooth garden dirt was full of hoof prints. Those pesky deer were already casing the crop and tip-toeing over my netting.. Isn’t it a pity that the only tender morsel of green in all of Virginia is in our garden?

The crop grew, the netting protected it, and Neighbor Becky finally told me it was ready for harvest. Hooray! She also informed me that turnip greens do not re-grow. Oops! I harvested the first batch of greens and also planted the rest of the package of seeds to ensure a continuing harvest. A big panful of turnip greens should be sufficient for one meal.

Now to cook this gastric delight! It seemed sensible to cook it tender-crisp like green beans with a couple of pieces of bacon for seasoning. Surprise! The greens shrunk down to a small mass of dark green substance, barely more than a blob on each of our plates. I suspect that the overwhelming local love of this gourmet dish is an acquired taste...and I’m not there yet. On a

score of one to ten, I'd give it a scant four. Jim told me the problem was that I did not use fatback like his mom always did. Fatback? Sounds scrumptious!

Neighbor Becky and my coworkers assured me that my problem was in the lack of fatback. Becky also told me that I should parboil it to get rid of the bitter taste, then cook it to perfection.

OK, a trip to the food center at our local Walmart was in order. I searched the meat cases and found nothing that said "fatback" so finally a sweet young gal came to my aid. She immediately found packages of fatback in various sizes. That product looked like salty lard. She told me I needed "about so much" of it in a mess of greens to make a really good meal. I bought the smallest package available.

Second try at the greens. This is getting serious. I picked a slightly larger pan of leaves, while noticing that the newly planted seed had sprouted nicely...and all the plants that I had harvested earlier in the week were growing lush and green again. Hmm...Looks like we will have a wonderful supply of greens this fall.

After parboiling the greens and draining the bright green liquid from the pan, then adding more clear water, it was time to add the really wonderful ingredients that would surely make this cooking experience a memorable occasion. Upon opening the package of fatback, I discovered that it was, indeed, pre-sliced salty solid lard and the substance stuck to my fingers. The package said it should be simmered about twenty minutes. No problem. I decided to cut up a few slices to ensure its timely goodness. This product had the texture of shoe leather when I tried to cut it into bite size pieces with a paring knife, so I attacked it with a scissors. It was no picnic but I got the salty stuff into the bubbling greens, added a bit more seasoning, and let it brew for about a half hour.

This time the end result was a slightly larger blob of dark green in the center of our plates. The fatback pieces still had the texture of shoe leather. I can't tell you how it tasted because it was unchewable. Jim thought perhaps the problem was that I had cut up the fatback instead of leaving it all in one piece as his mother had. NOW he tells me it is in there only to flavor the greens, not to actually be eaten!

Today my coworkers commiserated with me and snickered at my lack of expertise in the culinary endeavor of cooking greens. Can you believe they actually had the nerve to laugh..even when I was looking? Geraldine was shocked that I had drained away the "pot liquor" and shared her belief that the liquor was the good part of the dish. People told me that I must let the fatback cook down for at least five or six hours along with the greens.

Tonight after work, I went back to my cute little garden and picked the rest of the original twenty feet of turnip greens, washed them about a dozen times, whacked up a chunk of bacon into the pot along with seasoning and let the whole mess boil for a few minutes. Jim poured vinegar over

everything and declared that it was a really good supper. But he says the same thing when I serve him a can of beans, so I can't be real sure of the actual value of this latest adventure.

I do know that the newly planted seedlings are growing with abandon and I still give "greens" a scant four rating. Geraldine told me that I need to cook "poke greens" too. You are supposed to eat them once a year to cleanse your system....I don't even want to ask how they cleanse the system! She thinks they grow wild and you need to wait until somebody brings you a sackful. Diane tells me her family calls them Poke salad and she used to fry them with eggs for her granny. First I need to acquire a taste for all these turnip greens.

