

## All About Ramps

**Ramps and Chicago have an intimate connection that has been all but forgotten.**

The native Menomoni people called the broad-leaved wild ramps *pikwute sikakushia* (skunk plant), and they referred to the area near the southern shore of Lake Michigan, where the ramps grew abundantly, as *CicagaWuni* or *shikako* (skunk place) or, yes, Chicago. More delicate than the typical wild onion or garlic, ramps are more pronounced and lingering in flavor (though less hot) than ordinary cooking onions, and sometimes have a woody flavor, growing as they do on the forest floor.

### **Native Lore**

The Native Americans knew ramps well. They used them to treat coughs and colds, and they made a poultice from the juice of the strong summer bulbs to alleviate the pain and itching of bee stings. To early Native American and, later, to the white settlers, ramps were an important and welcome addition to the early spring menu. The fresh and tender green ramp leaves with their strong onion-garlic taste were an improvement on the bland winter fare and were regarded as a spring tonic that cleansed the blood.

Modern science supports this folk tradition. The ramp (*Allium tricoccum*), or wild leek, belongs to the same pungent genus as onions (*Allium cepa*), chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*), and garlic (*Allium sativum*), not to mention the showy ornamentals such as *A. giganteum*, with its massive purple pompon head. Alliums are a good source of Vitamin C, a fleeting nutrient that was often lacking in winter diets, as well as prostaglandin A1, a fatty acid known to be therapeutic in the treatment of hypertension. 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.

In late winter or very early spring, each bulb sends up two or three broad, smooth, oval-shaped leaves--similar to those of lily-of-the-valley--from the leaf litter on the forest floor. Eventually growing 8 to 12 inches tall, these leaves show deep maroon streaking at

the base and up along the parallel veins. Ramps reproduce by both bulb offsets and seeds, and large colonies can blanket a hillside. By late spring or early summer, as the tall canopy of trees leafs out and begins to shade the ground, the ramp's leaves wither and die, leaving only a single bud on a naked stalk. This bud opens in June or July to form a spherical cluster (umbel) of creamy white florets. Each quarter-inch flower has three sepals and three petals and produces a three-lobed seed capsule. After the ramp has finished blooming, it goes into dormancy, which lasts through the driest, hottest days of summer, fall, and the worst of winter's cold, recommencing its activity as the weather begins to moderate in March or April.

Here in Illinois, people head into woodlands in late March and early April, before the trees even begin to bud, to gather this native plant for the first fresh greens of the season. The foliage and bulbs can be used in salads and soups, and are especially good in omelets, quiches, and other egg dishes. Whether you use the leaves or the bulbs or both, many chefs say ramps are the best-tasting member of the entire onion family, wild or commercial. You can use the leaves or bulbs raw or cooked – on pizza, in sandwiches. For a special treat try fish wrapped in ramp leaves.

This March, The Land Connection, Spence Farm, and a group of chefs from Chicago invite you to get back in touch with what the wild foods evangelist Euell Gibbons called "the sweetest and the best of the wild onions" by joining us at RampFest on Friday, March 28.

### **Spence Farm**

All the ramps for RampFest are donated by Spence Farm in Fairbury, IL, ([www.thespencefarm.com](http://www.thespencefarm.com)) where Kris and Marty Travis dig 3000 pounds of leeks for about 3 weeks each year, from late March to early April. The leeks are sold to gourmet restaurants across the United states. The leek seeds are sold with their heirloom seed collection.

Spence Farm was settled by Marty's great, great, great grandfather in 1830, and is the oldest family farm in Livingston County Illinois. It began as 160 acres (purchased for 1.25/acre), but by the late 1800s the farm had grown to nearly 1000 acres and 36 farm buildings. Horses were bred and sold to England, and the farm produced sheep, hogs, cows, chickens and tons of maple syrup from over 600 trees.

By the 1970s, however, the farm had dwindled to the original 160 acres. The Spence family nearly lost the farm, but today Kris and Marty are resurrecting it as a diverse organic farm and a place where people can learn about the future of farming – crop and animal diversity, heirloom crops and heritage breeds, woodland management, and building restoration. Through education and tours, Kris and Marty are building a future for family farms in Illinois.