

TURNIP GREENS


- 2 bunches (about 2 lbs) of greens (turnip, mustard, collard, or a combination)
 - 1 smoked ham hock
 - 2 quarts water
 - 2/3 cup apple cider vinegar
 - 1 tsp sugar
 - 1 tsp salt
 - 1/4 tsp pepper
1. Add ham hock to water with vinegar, sugar, salt & pepper and bring to boil. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer for 1 hour.
 2. While the ham hock is simmering, prepare the greens. Wash thoroughly, cut away stems, and chop into pieces.
 3. Add greens to pot with the simmered broth, bring back to a simmer, and continue to simmer gently for 2 more hours, stirring occasionally.
 4. After 1 hour, adjust the seasonings if necessary, depending on the type of greens used.
 5. When done, remove the ham hock. Serve the greens with cornbread, with pepper sauce on the side.

Notes

1. As with all vegetables, the fresher greens are, the better they taste. These days, I seem to have a hard time finding really fresh greens, even in the “fresh” produce section of the grocery store. If you have access to a local farmer’s market, that’s probably your best bet — but go early in the morning.
2. Greens have to be “warshed” thoroughly before cooking to get the dirt out of them. I put mine in a sink full of water and gently dunk them several times. Depending on where they came from (local garden, grocery store, etc.) they may have so much dirt in them that the bottom of your sink will be quite gritty. Better in the sink than in your mouth!
3. Everybody who cooks greens has a preference for how they are to be cut up. Some people just tear them into pieces manually. The size of the pieces is up to you; there’s no right way to do it. With turnip greens, I often use a method I learned from Mark Bittman: cut out the central stem, stack up several layers of the half-leaves, roll them up like a big cigar, slice the cylinder into sections like the sections of a jelly roll, and then cut these sections in half. It’s quick work if you take the time to sharpen your knife before you start. Nowadays, of course, you can buy greens at the grocery store in bags already cut up. I use these occasionally when I’m pressed for time, but still, there’s nothing like absolutely fresh greens, preferably bought first thing in the morning from a good farmer’s market (if not picked right out of your own garden).
4. Some people like the smaller parts of the stems to be cooked along with the greens, but I prefer to leave the stems out. African-Americans often like even the bigger parts of the stems cooked with their greens. They just tear the whole thing into manageable pieces and throw it all in the pot. For me, it’s a texture issue. The stems are perfectly edible and nutritious, but I don’t like the fibrous stems to interfere with the softer texture of the greens themselves. But suit yourself.
5. Do you want mature greens with big leaves or young greens with small, tender leaves? Again, it’s a matter of personal preference. Obviously, the more mature leaves are somewhat tougher and stronger tasting.

Comments

1. Southerners debate which kind of greens they like best. Collards have a faithful following, particularly among African-Americans, but the other kinds of greens are also good. My personal favorite is turnip greens, especially since cooking them with vinegar mitigates the strong taste they can have otherwise.
 2. Cook greens with vinegar, you say? I admit this is unorthodox, but I have found that the results are wonderful if you get the concentration of vinegar just right. Many people put vinegar on their greens at the table, so years ago I started cooking greens with the vinegar already in them. The result is that the vinegar has a chance to blend with the ham
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hock broth while the greens are cooking, and this not only gives the greens a great taste but it also makes a savory “pot likker” (see below) that is indescribably delicious. *The trick is to get the amount of vinegar right.* Depending on the type of greens and the quantity you have after you’ve removed the stems and cut them up, you may have to add or subtract water and/or vinegar. For about 2 lbs of uncut greens, start by trying 2/3 cup of apple cider vinegar with 2 quarts of water. After a while, you will get a feel for how much vinegar you need in order to get the taste you prefer. This is worth experimenting with!

3. Pot likker is the broth left when vegetables, especially greens, are cooked in water with some kind of seasoning meat. It is not to be thrown away, but enjoyed as a part of the meal.
4. The pot likker left from cooking greens with a smoked ham hock and vinegar is good enough that you could serve it as a consommé. I dare you to try it! But most folks will just want to slice a piece cornbread in two and pour some of the pot likker over the cornbread. This is seriously good eating, especially when accompanied by a glass of good buttermilk.

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