

## HAVE YOU EVER HEARD OF RAMPS?

*by Karl Milde*

On Father's Day, a friend, we'll call him "Bob" for this story (not his real name), gave me some roots in a bucket of topsoil and told me to plant them. He called them "ramps" (the name was new to me). He told me they shoot up in early spring and one should only eat them when they're young and tender. Wait too long and they're...hmmm...not so good. "They taste like garlicky leeks," he said, and added he thought they were an Italian specialty but wasn't sure. They're expensive and hard to get. You've gotta try it. Nothing like it. You'll end up craving it every year, like white asparagus.

Bob lives near Heritage Hills – across Lovell Street and down one of those perpendicular roads on the opposite side that lead to the lake community. He said he'd discovered this patch of ramps in the wild while walking in the dense woods behind his house. He beamed like he'd found a pot of gold, attracted not by the sight of the gold, but by the sweet odor of garlic. He didn't know what it was at the time, but he knew he'd stumbled upon something good.

Having never heard of ramps, I Googled the word and discovered Bob was right on the money. Although I'd never heard of them before, I learned ramps were a real delicacy, sought after by savvy chefs who were on the lookout for new flavors to try. Ramps sell for high prices, when you can find them. You sometimes, though rarely, see them for sale at Farmers' Markets.

Ramps are a type of wild allium that are related to spring onions and leeks. They add zest to food with their garlicky onion flavor. They are so-called "rhizomes," which means they stem and multiply from a horizontal rootstalk. It takes about seven years for one ramp seed to emerge as a small shoot. Luckily, the roots are relatively easy to dig up and transplant.

Hunting for ramps is a favorite springtime activity for foragers, who will often keep the locations of their wooded ramp sites a secret. Ramps thrive in rocky woodland soils and shady, wet, and loamy environments.

The day after Bob's present of ramp roots (Bob and I were celebrating our kinship as dads and granddads), I brought the roots to my garden and planted them. I can't wait to see what happens come next May. When they send up their tender shoots, I'll harvest them, chop them, and add them to scrambled eggs. Better yet, I'll chop the leaves finely and mix them with softened butter and a little sea salt. Presto! Homemade ramp butter.