

How I Cook Collard Greens - by Natalie Daise



My Collard Guy under The Big Tree

Well, first, you've got to get the greens. They can't be just any greens. They need to have character references. It's good if we know who their people are. If I don't grow the greens myself, I have to find somebody who did. This is important. The best greens come from a garden not too far from where you live. I go looking for a Guy with a truck full of deep green leaves. In Pawleys Island you can find the Guy under The Big Tree. That's what folk call it. If you live in the area you'll know where it is. If not, you're out of luck. I recently moved to Georgetown and it took me a minute to find a Guy, but eventually I did – down Highmarket Road a good bit, parked in a vacant parking lot, his greens piled high in the back of a big blue Ford. But this is just the beginning. A discussion must ensue, and it generally goes like this -- You: Those greens look pretty good. Guy: Yeah, they are. Picked 'em fresh this morning. You: Well they look fresh. Guy: Yeah, got a good frost on 'em. You: Good. I'll take (1 – however many) bunches. The Guy nods, grabs a couple of plastic bags from the front of the vehicle or from under the table, and stuffs in your greens. He takes your money, and if he's a really good Guy, and if there isn't a line of folk waiting, he carries them to your car.

Next, the greens must be cleaned. Even though collard greens picked after a good frost seem thick and indestructible, they're really pretty delicate. You can't leave them lying around in the bags for a day or so or they'll go bad. So, if you're not going to clean them within the next few hours, refrigerate them. When you're ready to clean them, scrub out your sink, put the stopper in and fill it full of cool water. Now pull your collard greens out the fridge and begin to break the leaves off the thick stem. Submerge the leaves in the cool water. Stuff as many in as you can push beneath the surface. Swish the water around a bit. Let them soak for a few minutes. Then let the water out and do it a couple of more times. Real greens with good character are sometimes sandy, so it's important to clean them well. Some folk put a little cider vinegar in the final rinse just to make sure.



Step three – preparing the greens to cook. This is a matter of preference. Some folk cook the stems and others don't. Some folk cut the collard leaves and others tear them. I don't think it makes much difference. But I must say, if you're cooking for a lot of people it's easier to cut them than tear them. I start by cutting out the big center stem. Then stack several leaves on top of each other, roll them up in a tube the long way and cut them with a sharp paring knife, first running the blade down the full length and then chopping my way across them. I've learned this is called *chiffonade*. I don't think that's what my Daddy called it, but he's the one who showed me how to do it.



So, steps 2 and 3 are the hardest parts. (If you're lucky you can get somebody else to do it. Just make sure they know how. Serving sandy greens will ruin your reputation.) The rest is the fun stuff. Get a large pot and stuff all the rinsed and chopped greens in. I've got a heavy 12 qt. pot I've been using for years. After the greens are in the pot, I chop 2 to 3 onions and put them on top. I may dice a green pepper as well and throw that on top too. I toss in a couple of tablespoons of minced garlic (I buy mine pre-minced in a jar). I add about a tablespoon of dried oregano, 1 or 2 tablespoons minced dried onions (I know I chopped fresh onion, but the taste is different so I use both), and as much black pepper as I feel like adding. I also add about a teaspoon or so of red pepper flakes because I like the hint of heat. You can always add hot sauce later if you want more.

But I'm not done. A lot of folk put meat in their greens but I don't because I know too many vegetarians. I used to be one. I do want my greens to have a bit of smokiness and the smooth feel of fat, so I add the following: a couple of tablespoons of Worcestershire Sauce (I use Lea & Perrins – once again because my Daddy did, but any brand will do) and a nice few dollops of Liquid Smoke. How much? Not sure. About 1 to 2 teaspoons I guess, depending on how much greens you've got. Remember I'm working with a 12 qt. pot. Then I add 1 or 2 Tablespoons of Extra Virgin Olive Oil.



I pack it all down as tight as I can. I don't mind if it bulges out the top of the pot. I add about a cup of chicken or vegetable broth, put the top on and turn the burner to medium. After about 15 minutes, the greens have cooked down a bit, so I take off the top and stir all the stuff on top down into the greens. The greens will have begun to release their own liquid. (My grandma said this is the pot liquor, where all the vitamins are) This is when I add salt. I don't know – I just shake until it feels right. It's always easier to add salt later than to take it away. Once I've stirred it down, I put the top back on and lower the heat just a tad. I check on the greens every 10 minutes or so to give them a stir and make sure the liquid hasn't cooked out. If it has, I add a bit of water. About 30 - 40 minutes will do it. Some folk cook greens all day, but I find that unnecessary. Just taste them. Are the leaves tender and tasty? Are they still green? Then it's just enough time. And if the greens have good character and were well raised, they'll also be just a little sweet. Happy Eating!