

Stroll

A LATE ENCOUNTER *with* **CRUCIFERS**



Illustration: Courtesy Michele Humes

By Michele Humes

ABOUT GRAVY

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When a chance encounter with the *Oxford American* magazine introduced me to Eudora Welty, Donna Tartt, and the notion that a yam could be candied, I became Hong Kong's preeminent teenage Southernist.

Ten years and one French culinary diploma later, I was still fascinated by the food and literature of the South. So it was with a morbid delight that I came upon *The Lady & Sons Savannah Country Cookbook*, which unites Paula Deen's recipes with an enthusiastic and unlikely foreword by John Berendt, of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* fame.

"There are some things we do that would make a French chef sick," Deen tells Berendt. But let him taste it, "and he'll get over being sick real quick."

This spring, in my New York City kitchen and on my blog, *Georgia on My Thighs*, I began putting her boast to the test. One of the

first recipes I tackled was Steak and Greens, Deen’s riff on collards. The recipe called to mind, for me, Flannery O’Connor’s Ruby Hill, a character in the story “A Stroke of Good Fortune.”

“Collard greens!” she said, spitting the word from her mouth this time as if it were a poisonous seed.”

Ruby Hill is having a bad day. Catching her reflection in the lobby mirror, she realizes she’s walked all the way home from the grocery store with a collard leaf stuck to her cheek. She doesn’t even like collard greens; she’s only making them for her baby brother, fresh out of the army and already getting in her way.

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When she said she’d fix Rufus anything he liked, she meant it. But he “had not had the gumption to think of one civilized dish—he had said collard greens.” Ruby had always suspected that her brother would never amount to anything, and now this tasteless request had confirmed it.

Collard greens, I understand, are supposed to reek as they simmer, which may explain Ruby Hill’s annoyance at having to cook them. Do they, though? Unlike, say, tripe, which really does have an evil stench all its own, I find that collard greens smell rather like they taste. Since I enjoy eating them, I don’t really mind breathing them.

Assuming you do object to the smell of collards, Paula Deen notes that placing an unshelled pecan in the pot will counteract the odor. I’ve also seen instructions that call for two unshelled pecans, a single shelled pecan, and even wadded-up newsprint, although I have no clue what one actually does with the newsprint.

Here’s what Bill Smith, author of *Seasoned in the South*, has to say about such techniques: “Even people who love collards complain about the way they make the house smell while cooking. People have different cures for this: Place four pecans in the pot. Cover the top of the collards with slices of white bread. None of this works.”

Smell or no smell, I loved Paula Deen’s Steak and Greens, and I learned from it. I had my doubts about the eleven-ingredient spice rub, which seemed to have been assembled through a series of wild stabs at a spice rack.

And I did wonder why a book like Deen’s, in which salads containing bacon outnumber salads that don’t, would, in a traditionally porky dish like collards, call for beefsteak instead of fatback. Was beefsteak up to the job?

As for the gravy—five whole tablespoons of flour to thicken it? Really?

Really. And not just any flour, but flour toasted butterscotch brown in a dry skillet. I’d cooked flour with butter to varying shades of roux, the French binder that gives body to sauces and gravies—and, in its Louisiana incarnation, serves as the powerful, chocolate-colored backbone to gumbo—but I’d never browned just the flour.

Well, dry-toasting it turns it nutty and fine. It stirs straight into the broth without lumping, and rounds out the stewing liquid into something mellow and complex.

That stewing liquid, or “potlikker,” is copious and wonderfully good. “This,” notes Deen, “is a sopping dish,” and you can sop up the earthy, briny juices with a crusty roll, a plump little corn muffin, or, as I did, a mound of boiled rice. Those who don’t love the collards themselves should still find plenty to like in the beefy potlikker and chewy strips of top round.

As for me, I do like soggy, slimy, faintly metallic-tasting collards. I was raised, in Hong Kong, on soupy platefuls of the bitter Chinese green, *gai lan*, and, to my palate, this iconic Southern vegetable tastes distinctly Southern Chinese.

To read Paula Deen’s original recipe, turn to The Lady & Sons Savannah Country Cookbook. To read Michele Humes’s adaptation, visit www.georgiaonmyhighs.com.