

A Mess of Collards

1 bunch of collard greens, stems removed and torn into palm-sized pieces
½ cup diced ham, bacon, or salt pork
¼ cup sliced red onion
2 tbsp minced garlic
1 qt water, give or take
Salt to taste
Vinegar, to taste
Crystal hot sauce (optional, but not really)



For once, I'm finding myself at a bit of a loss for words. Usually, in these recipe intros that I write, I wax poetic about how much I love this vegetable or that fruit or tell a story of how or why the recipe came to be. The words often come easily, and I find myself having to type too quickly to keep up with what's coming out of my head. That is simply not the case today. When I think of collard greens (or collards as I prefer to call them), words don't come. I feel an emotion, more than thoughts. And it's a rather difficult one to describe. Bear with me while I try to explain myself.

Collards are the green most closely associated with the South. They have a history in Africa that goes back millennia, and begins here, in the American South, around the 1600s. People have lived and died by the harvest of this green. They have sustained generations. They have nourished the broken-hearted, and the broth they make from cooking (the pot likker!) has cured the sick for centuries. Collards are one of the foods about which it can be honestly said: this is more than just a meal; this is almost a religion.

As a Yankee transplant, I don't have the memories of my Mimi standing over the pot on Sundays, stirring and cooking them up. And, although Mimi says I'm half-Southern (after all, my mother was raised in Mobile, her family still lives there, and I spent quite a lot of time down there growing up), it is one thing to be a visitor in this culture down here, and another to belong to it.

I have lived in Birmingham for three years now. And my quest to belong to this culture, to rid myself of the childhood feeling of being an Outsider, has been closely tied to the land, to what it gives us, and how those ingredients have been prepared for centuries. To me, being able to cook collards, to do it well, was tantamount to Belonging. If I could cook them, it meant that I understood some certain principles about making something wonderful from a handful of poorer things. That I knew and understood the complex history of how and why this vegetable is grown, and why it tastes better coming from the red dirt than it does the brown dirt. It meant I understood how to use pork like my Mama R did, as a seasoning, and not the main event. To me, this recipe, this meal of collards cooked with some pork, is so much more than just food. When I cook this, and I smell the rich smell of the greens, and I get to eat a bowl and drink the pot likker, I feel like I'm finally home. I don't feel like an Outsider anymore. It makes me feel like

there's a part of myself that found its way back, and I am whole again. All that is to say, this one is important to me. And while I'm certain there are better, more experienced cooks out there who make collards a more heavenly thing than I can, this is the version that brought me home.

Tear your collards, don't chop them. For one, tearing will break the cell walls and cause the flavor to come out a little easier. For another, spending a few minutes handling your food is a fine thing for the soul. If you use salt pork, you'll have to soak it for a while to get out the extra salt, and you won't have to add hardly any salt. I can't give you the exact amount of salt you'll need, since it depends on how much water you'll need, how salty your greens are to begin with, etc etc. Just taste it and add more if you need it.

I like to use a slow cooker and cook them for about 4 hours on high, 6-8 on low. You can certainly simmer them on a stove top for about an hour and a half, maybe two hours, and they'll be wonderful. You can pressure cook them, too, but then you'll miss the wonderful smells.

Begin by washing your greens very well. Collards love to harbor dirt. Add the greens, the onion, garlic, and pork product of your choice to your slow cooker. If the pork you're using doesn't have much fat, add a tablespoon or two of bacon fat to the pot. Add enough water so that the surface of the greens is above the water, but you can still stir everything pretty easily (should be about a quart. Honestly though, the amount of water can be pretty variable. Just make sure there's enough to keep everything cooking and not burning. You can always add more later.). Add salt until the water tastes good (it's usually around a tablespoon for me, could be more or less salt for you). Cook on low for 6-8 hours, on high for less time, pressure cooked for hardly any time at all. Check it a few times throughout the day to make sure there's still enough liquid. The greens will release some liquid, and the water will turn into a broth more divine than just about anything out there.

Once the greens are done to your liking (I like them soft, but still with a bit of chew and texture), stir in a few good splashes of white or apple cider vinegar. Taste the greens as you add it so that it doesn't get too sour.

Don't you dare throw away the pot likker. I like to have my collards almost like a soup, with plenty of the pot likker in the bowl (all the better if there's cornbread to soak it up). But you can also drain it off and use it like a broth or drink it for a tonic (it makes a great hangover cure). The liquid is incredibly nutritious, and the taste is something else for sure.

Serve your greens with cornbread, beans, or by themselves. I like Crystal on top, just a little in every few bites. Some people say this is sacrilege. I say that every path home looks a little bit different.

May your path be easy, and may you too find your way Home.