Poke Salit, Tradition & Folklore

Don’t know what Poke Salit is? Well you are not alone. Poke Salit is a slightly obscure, greens recipe prepared from the harvested leaves of pokeweed. And while not widely known, South Carolinians who have grown up eating this earthy dish look forward to it every year.

Poke Salit being prepared.
Image by Pauline Stone

Pauline Stone grew up with Poke Salit and now prepares pans of the cooked greens every spring at Uncle Jerry’s soup kitchen near Donalds, SC. Ms. Stone is passionate about Poke and its lost tradition and had the following to say:

“As I was thinking about my knowledge from my Grandmother and my Mother concerning Poke Salit, I realized that for as long as I can remember when the spring weather arrived, they began to look for the tender green plant.

It had to be gathered before the berries appeared in the tops. The pokeweed was considered to be a beneficial food, and as children we all leaned about this spring tonic - everyone had to eat it at least twice to clear our blood from the colds from the winter.

As we grew up and were taught to look for the tender leaves. We would walk the creek and river banks over around First Creek near Antreville, S.C. After harvest, the Poke was looked over and washed several times in clean water each time. The poke was then cut into small pieces, put in a boiling pot, covered with fresh water and salt. This was repeated several times. After the parboiling, we would have fatback cooked out, removed and ready to fry the Poke in its grease. We added spring green onions to the Poke and hot grease. After the Poke Salit was done, it was always served with deviled eggs, deep fried corn bread and peach cobbler.

I do the same now, I start looking for the Poke as soon as the weather changes. I fix it the same way, with fat back, deviled eggs, pork roast, deep fried corn bread, peach cobbler and cold sweet tea.

The older folk come from all over to eat our Poke Salit.

My Mother’s doctor from Abbeville always asked her if she had eaten her Poke Salit and told her, make sure you eat it twice; it’s a very good spring tonic.”
If you are interested in carrying on this deep rooted tradition there are a couple of things to consider before harvesting and cooking.

- Parts of the pokeweed are considered poisonous, but the young tender leaves are edible when handled correctly.
  - Harvest young shoots in the spring and avoid any part of the root or older stem.
  - It is recommended that pokeweed be harvested before berries form on the plant.
  - The greens must be soaked a minimum of two times, and then boiled twice, with fresh water each time.
- Poke Salit is nutritious. According to the USDA Nutrient Database for Standard Reference raw poke shoots are low in carbohydrates and high in fiber. Additionally, raw poke is a strong source of potassium and contains a good range of B vitamins.

### Poke Salit

1 to 2 pounds tender young leaves  
1 bunch of fresh green onions  
½ lb. fatback (salt pork)

- Harvest young pokeweed; remove leaves and discard the remainder of the shoot
- Submerge leaves in fresh water for 10 minutes, repeat twice with fresh water each time.
- Cook fatback, remove solid pieces and retain fat.
- Cut poke leaves into bite size pieces.

- Bring a large pot of water, plus 1 tablespoon of salt to a boil; add leaves to boiling water and cook for 20 minutes, drain; repeat twice with fresh water each time.
- Add poke leaves and green onions to reserved drippings and cook on medium high until onions are tender. Season with salt and fresh pepper to taste.

### Pokeweed Hush Puppies

½ cup (packed) young pokeweed leaves  
1 ½ cups self-rising cornmeal  
½ cup self-rising flour  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
½ teaspoon salt  
1 cup buttermilk  
1 egg, lightly beaten  
Vegetable oil for deep frying

- Harvest young pokeweed; remove leaves and discard the remainder of the shoot; submerge leaves in fresh water for 10 minutes, repeat twice with fresh water each time. Bring a large pot of water to a boil; add leaves to boiling water and cook for 10 minutes, drain; repeat twice with fresh water each time.
- Drain, squeeze dry and finely chop.
- Using a mixing bowl, stir together the cornmeal, flour, baking soda, and salt. Stir in the pokeweed.
- In a small bowl, stir together the buttermilk and egg. Pour the buttermilk mixture into the dry ingredients and mix until blended. Heat oil to 350 °F. Drop the batter, 1 teaspoon at a time, into the oil. Fry until golden, turning the hushpuppies during the cooking process.