

IN THE SPIRIT OF COLLARDS

January 31, 2016

“Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.
I see it in the faces...”

Cindy is singing a special this morning, as big a gift as Miss Sari's piano playing. Ever since Kenneth, our pastor, her husband, told us, we have been waiting. Fifteen minutes is a long time to wait when you know Cindy is going to sing. My soul thrills to Cindy's voice. It comes truly from her being. She means what she sings.

Before she sang Cindy spoke to the forty of us gathered for church. She told of a talk she and I had the day before of how special Clopton is to us. How sweet a place. Not the land, the people. We were sitting at a picnic table in my Aunt Hazel's carport having lunch. Her daughter and son-in-law were nearby. Ten others were inside sitting around the table with Miss Hazel. We had brought her lunch for her ninetieth birthday which was the day before.

That morning, I had gone to my garden to cut collards, fresh and sweet after the frosts. While I cut the broad grey-green leaves, I glanced over the frosted field toward Hazel's house, once my grandmother's house. All the while imaginings filled my head. Hazel will taste the collards, will

say, “Why these are Beth’s collards. I’d know her cooking anywhere. Best collards in this county.” Just as if I were my grandmother at a church picnic one hundred years ago. As if I were Lizzie who had gone to her garden in the morning to cut her collards, clean them and cook them on the wood stove. The fresh vegetable that would come at the end of winter just as the song birds begin their return. “Chhhheee-upppp, cheeeeeuppp.” from the woods.

Or, just as if Hazel or my grandmother had taught me to grow and cook these collards and now would be appreciating their work living in me. Maybe it would be easier if someone had taught me. I’d know where and when to plant my collards and how to cook them. Good thing collards know more than I do. They know how to grow, at least here in southern Alabama with sandy soil and cool winters. In the spirit of growth, I celebrate collards.

What would be good is if someone had taught me how to tolerate the smell of collards as they cook. The cooking is not hard. Cut the big leaves, put them in a pot of stock or with a ham hock. (I use pre-cooked Costco bacon. Lower fat, but enough to season.) Add an onion, red pepper, and simmer for three hours.

Now, this is the hard part. When Collards cook, they really stink. There is no other word for it. Rotten eggs permeating the house for all the three hours they simmer.

Even as my mouth puckers and my nose crinkles, I am filled with another being. I am my grandmother, keeping the wood stove stoked to cook the dried beans and fried cornbread that go with winter collards. I am proud. I am happy there has been a frost to sweeten the collards. My grandmother most likely had wrung the neck of a chicken to fry. I cannot do that. Not even imagine it. I think I remember that my grandmother's kitchen at the back of her house was quite devoid of walls, mostly greyed wood posts, open to air.

And, I am me today. The woman who has just picked the first crop of collards she ever grew. Not from seeds. From pre-started two inch plants brought at Walmart. Soon, this spring, I'll try seeds. An early crop before much heat. Collards don't like hot weather.

I am also the woman who is taking collards to a lunch of southern people who have eaten them all their lives and know what they are supposed to taste like. At least when cooked right. It is not that I'm brave. I know that the collards I have cooked will be appreciated by the people at

the luncheon. They are this kind of people, the kind that appreciates what is given. The people of the "the Church" -- about fifteen of the forty members -- taking a birthday lunch to Hazel, one of four pillars who kept the church going when people left for cities until now when people are coming back.

We had taken lunch to celebrate her birthday for the last three years, since Hazel stopped coming to church. Again, we will gather at my house to sort the food and go together to Hazel's. We don't want to confuse her with multiple entries. Too much confusion and she will want to go home to someplace other than the house we are in where she has lived for fifty-four years. We'll go in quietly, each kiss and hug her, so she knows we are friendly. We will set out our food on the counter: fried chicken, field peas, green beans, potato salad. I will put out the collards. Kenneth, our pastor, will put out his fried corn bread-- thin, crispy little cakes that we, and especially Hazel, all love. Familiar food. Except for the cake from Costco, big flowers and a sun with smiley faces, perfect for the child Hazel has become. Hazel will be seated. Her daughter Karen will fix her mother a plate.

Perhaps Hazel will still say the blessing. She has done so wonderfully. Probably still can even if she does not know who we are today. This will make us happy.

When we first did this three years ago, we left feeling blessed. Hazel knew everyone. Remembered names and knew we were “the Church.” She was an adorable child at her birthday party, flirting with the men. A coquette, she patted the pastor on the rear only to claim we were telling stories on her, laughing. Touching was on her mind. We all felt that too. We wanted to be with the God she was preparing to meet. The God to be told, “These are the best people on earth, Lord. And they love you.” He would be told to kiss us all when we came to be with her. Someone asked, “What was your favorite birthday, Hazel?” Beaming, she said, “This one,” denying she had ever had a birthday party before.

But I heard this five years before. She was eighty-five. Her children had a party for her with church, family from twenty miles away, old friends. There was food and cake. Someone asked what her favorite birthday had been. “This one,” she giggled.

We’re hoping for another day of celebration shared with Hazel. We’re all worried that it may not happen. Two days ago, my husband was

at the road across from Hazel's house clearing the fence line of viney overgrowth. He was freaked out when Hazel appeared on her porch in slippers and robe screaming, "Beth, help me. Save me. Help me, Beth." over and over. Her sitter tried to take her in. She could not & yelled at him to tell Hazel he was not Beth. He did. Hazel kept yelling for help so he left the road. Once out of her sight, she quieted.

We did not know what to expect. There was a frost on our spirits.
But, today, Cindy sings,

"Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.
I see it in the faces..."

In the spirit of Collards, sweeter after a frost. Nourishing even with the stink, I say "Thank you, Lord."

And, in the spirit of collard growth, more nourishing with new recipes, modern stoves, I say, "Thank you, Lord."

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[http://www.whfoods.com/genpage.php?  
tname=foodspice&dbid=138](http://www.whfoods.com/genpage.php?tname=foodspice&dbid=138)



Any time of year is a good time to add this exceptionally nutrient-rich cruciferous vegetable to your Healthiest Way of Eating. Included among collards' wealth of health-promoting benefits is their rich concentration of vitamin K1— just one serving of these amazing leafy greens provide you with 1,045% of the Daily Value for vitamin K, another key nutrient for bone and cardiovascular health.

## **For more on Collards**

[Chopped Collard Greens](#)

[Healthy Eating with the Seasons](#)

## **What's New and Beneficial About Collard Greens**

- The cholesterol-lowering ability of collard greens may be the greatest of all commonly eaten cruciferous vegetables. In a recent study, steamed collard greens outshined steamed kale, mustard greens, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cabbage in terms of its ability to bind bile acids in the digestive tract. When this bile acid binding takes place, it is easier for the bile acids to be excreted from the body. Since bile acids are made from cholesterol, the net impact of this bile acid binding is a lowering of the body's cholesterol level. It's worth noting that steamed collards show much greater bile acid binding ability than raw collards.
- We get unique health benefits from collard greens in the form of cancer protection. The cancer-preventive properties of collard greens may be largely related to 4 specific glucosinolates found in this cruciferous vegetable: glucoraphanin, sinigrin,

gluconasturtian, and glucotropaeolin. Each of these glucosinolates can be converted into an isothiocyanate (ITC) that helps lower our cancer risk by supporting our detox and anti-inflammatory systems.

## **WHFoods Recommendations**

You'll want to include collard greens as one of the cruciferous vegetables you eat on a regular basis if you want to receive the fantastic health benefits provided by the cruciferous vegetable family. At a minimum, include cruciferous vegetables as part of your diet 2-3 times per week, and make the serving size at least 1-1/2 cups. Even better from a health standpoint, enjoy collard greens and other vegetables from the cruciferous vegetable group 4-5 times per week, and increase your serving size to 2 cups.

It is very important not to overcook collard greens. Like other cruciferous vegetables overcooked collard greens will begin to emit the unpleasant sulfur smell associated with overcooking. To help collard greens to cook more quickly, evenly slice the leaves into 1/2-inch slices and the stems into 1/4-inch pieces. Let them sit for at least 5 minutes to bring out the health-promoting qualities and steam for 5 minutes. Serve with our [Mediterranean Dressing](#). See [5-Minute Collard Greens](#).