

Spring Has Sprung...A Spring Allium!

By Oana Harrison

What better way to spring your taste buds into action than a nice, fresh and green spring onion, garlic or leek? This youthful trio from the *Allium* family can put a spring in your step by fending off germs from the inside out. So, unless you're a vampire, on a date, or a vampire on a date, sink your teeth into some *Allium* health!

Mind

They might be young but they sure are mighty: the spring or green onion, garlic and leek are a vivacious bunch from the *Allium* family. Said to cure everything from earaches to dog bites to evil spirits, these fresh and...uh-hum...“aromatic” vegetables have held their own since prehistoric times, originating from Asia and making their way into mainstream cuisine worldwide.

Spring Onion or *Allium wakegi* came from Central Asia and was a staple in the prehistoric diet. Often, young sprouts from the regular onion bulbs (*Allium cepa*) are packaged and sold as “green onions” but the true green onion or scallion is a type of onion that will stay forever young (i.e. it will never fully mature into a large bulb). Sometimes, scallions are confused with shallots, mainly due to their name. Although they are related, the shallots are distinctively different: they are a fully-grown onion variety, displaying a cluster-like bulb similar to garlic.

Spring Garlic or *Allium sativum* derives its name from two Anglo-Saxon words meaning spear-plant. It too is an immature youngster, bringing a fresh but mild flavor boost to any meal. It looks like a paler version of its cousin, the green onion, and its leaves are flat rather than cylindrical. Green garlic is in season February through June.

Spring Leek or *Allium ampeloprasum* looks like green garlic...on steroids. It has a mild and more delicate flavor when young but can grow to be quite thick and tall. Although it is available all year round, leek is at its best when young, from September to March.

Body

The *Allium* family is known for its omnipotent curing powers. Legends praise them for everything from curing common colds to fending off evil spirits – and there's no smoke without a fire. Containing sulfur compounds, which “enhance” them with a characteristic smell, the members of this family are antibiotic, anti-inflammatory, antiseptic, antispasmodic, digestive, diuretic, expectorant, hypoglycemic, hypotensive and stimulant, just to name a few of their healing powers.

Onions might make you cry but you should be crying tears of joy. Onions and garlic both contain high levels of polyphenols, which are antioxidants preventing cardiovascular diseases, cancers, and some neurodegenerative diseases. Both onions and garlic are

natural anti-clotting agents and can improve circulation, lower cholesterol and high blood pressure due to their content of sulfur, chromium and vitamin B6. Both onions and garlic are especially high in quercetin, a flavonoid protecting against heart disease, stroke and some types of cancer. Quercetin is an anti-allergenic element and, when combined with vitamin C and isothiocyanates, abundant in alliums, it has an anti-inflammatory effect.

Onions can prevent ulcers by absorbing damaging intestinal gasses and preventing the growth of ulcer-forming microorganisms. In addition, onions have been used in traditional medicine around the world to treat earaches and respiratory disorders. A newly discovered compound in onions might help prevent osteoporosis. High in iron and easy to assimilate in the body, onions can help treat anemia, delivering the fully recommended daily dosage in only one hundred milligrams. Fresh onion juice, mixed in with a bit of vinegar can help alleviate the sting of a bee or other minor skin irritations. It also helps form scar tissue, thus speeding up the healing process.

Known for its content of sulfur (over 70 different compounds), calcium, potassium, zinc, selenium, and iron, garlic exhibits unique health-enhancing characteristics. Garlic contains germanium, a substance that promotes healing by alerting the body's immune system of harmful substances and free radicals. It also emits a type of ultraviolet ray known to stimulate cell growth and rejuvenation. In addition, Garlic is anti-fungal and anti-viral. There are more than 70 different infections that garlic can help prevent or cure!

Adding on the family's protective powers, leeks provide vitamins C, B6 and K, as well as manganese and iron. Vitamin C helps with wound healing and collagen formation, while vitamin B6 is important in efficient energy utilization. Vitamin K is a coagulant and it also stimulates growth of bone and connective tissues. Manganese combines with proteins that are useful for many reactions in the body, while iron is important in the formation of hemoglobin. Although it doesn't receive as much credit for it, leek plays an important role in the prevention of cardiovascular diseases. Leek has a high content of folic acid and provides a flavonoid called kaempferol, which are both responsible for protecting blood vessels against harmful free radicals. Leeks are also low in calories and sodium, providing 20 percent of the RDA for vitamin C and iron in only 3 and a half ounces.

All in all, the Allium family can really benefit your health, if not your breath... The bad after-taste comes from allicin, a powerful and volatile chemical released when the vegetable is consumed. But fear not, there are ways to rectify that socially offensive side effect. Try rinsing with lemon juice and warm water, or chew on an orange peel. Other natural remedies include: anise, fennel or dill seed. Try accompanying the Allium consumption with carrots or fresh apples to neutralize the allicin. Remember all the positive contributions of onions, garlic and leeks and invite the Allium family to your table on a regular basis!

Soul

The Lore

Egyptians, who mummified their Pharaohs with onions alongside their bodies, worshiped onions. The onions were considered a symbol of eternity (mainly because of their many layers). The other theories were that the strong scent would prompt the dead to breathe again or that its magical powers would provide strength in the afterlife. Greek athletes drank onion juice before the Olympic games in order to fortify their bodies. Roman Emperor Pompeii was a fan of onions and one of the first cookbooks written by the Roman epicure Apicius mentions onions extensively.

In ancient India, garlic was thought to be an aphrodisiac because of its stimulant or tonic powers. Egyptians consumed garlic on a daily basis to keep their immune system strong, while Greeks consumed garlic before battles. In European tradition, garlic fends off evil, while dreaming of garlic in the house is a sign of good fortunes.

Leek, also known as “poor man’s asparagus” is endorsed by Hippocrates, the ancient Greek physician and “father of medicine,” who prescribed it against nosebleeds. The Roman emperor Nero gained the nickname Porophagus (“leek eater”) due to his large consumption of leek, which he thought would improve his singing voice. Leeks are Wales’ national symbol. According to the legend, in an epic battle against the Saxons, the Welsh wore leeks in their hats in order to differentiate themselves from their enemy. The Welsh won the battle and thus the leek became a lucky symbol for the nation.

In the US, garlic was “persona non-grata” until the 1940s. Nowadays, the USA consumes 250 million pounds of garlic per year and almost 300 million pounds of green onion and shallots. So, if you are not one of the consumers yet, join the movement!

The Cooking

We are all familiar with green onions, but maybe not so much with green garlic or leek in our every day cooking. Here are some tips that will help you incorporate the *Allium* vegetables into your diet.

You can substitute the green or spring version of onion and garlic in recipes where you normally use the mature bulbs. Spring onions are a little sweeter and have a less sharp taste, while the green part of the spring onions provides a fresh bonus. If you are using only the white part of the green onions, match the quantity to the volume of a regular bulb. Use the green part to top off soups, sandwiches or spreads. Spring garlic has a mild nutty flavor and you don’t have to peel the cloves in order to consume it. One stalk and bulb of spring garlic is equivalent to a small onion, or a leek and one clove of mature garlic.

Many of you use chopped green onions in omelets and frittatas, but try eating them raw with a feta, tomato and bib lettuce sandwich for a healthy side-kick. You can add them to

guacamole or cheese spreads for a nicer, less crunchy texture than regular onions. Use green garlic in pesto spreads or when cooking a Mediterranean dish, such as gnocchi or risotto. Grilled or slightly sautéed green garlic or onion will make a good side dish for lamb chops, alongside mashed potatoes. Try preparing a green garlic or leek soup. Use raw chopped onions, garlic or leek to top off potato soups and salads, or even pickle them.

Here are some recipes from the Irish and Italian cuisines to get you started in your spring *Allium* cooking endeavors!

Recipes

Garlic Ranch Wing Sauce

Ingredients:

- ¼ cup I Can't Believe It's Not Butter, Melted
- 2 Tbl. Hidden Valley Ranch Seasoning
- 2 ½ Tbl. Chopped Green Garlic
- ¼ tsp. Cayenne Pepper
- 1 tsp. Honey
- 1 tsp. Soy Lecithin (optional)
- 1 tsp. Xanthan Gum (optional)

Method:

Mix all ingredients thoroughly in a large mixing bowl.
Lecithin and Xanthan Gum may be left out if using immediately.
Label and store in refrigerator.

Plating:

Reheat sauce in a double boiler until liquefied.
Toss Fried Chicken Wings or other desired snack in sauce until coated thoroughly.

-Kris Johnson
Executive Chef
Irish Times Pub & Restaurant
11348 Parkside Drive
Knoxville, TN 37934
(865) 675-8800
irishtimesknoxville@yahoo.com