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SPECIAL EDITION

GREEN LIVING

“If there’s one ingredient that represents Western North Carolina, it’s ramps. A lot of chefs get excited about it.”

Brian Crow Executive chef of Chestnut



Alan Muskat harvests ramps during a foraging tour in Swannanoa on April 6.

PHOTOS BY JOSH BELL/ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

Ramped-up menu

Season peaks in WNC, with restaurants featuring plant in dishes

Tiana Kennell Asheville Citizen Times | USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE – Before ramps were popular to mainstream audiences and featured on upscale restaurant menus, Chef William Dissen recalls a time when family and community members questioned his use of them at his restaurant, The Market Place.

For generations, ramps had an unfavorable reputation for its strong, pungent odor, and were perceived as something found on the forest floors, with little worth.

“It’s a unique trait for Appalachia — living off the land — and that ties into the wild food conversation about why are we eating ramps or wild mushrooms. People ate that stuff because they were poor and there was free food in the woods, like a free grocery store, if you know what you’re looking for,” said Dissen, a West Virginia native.

Now, ramp festivals, dining experiences, menu specials and handcrafted products featuring the leafy green delicacy show the value and diverse uses of the wild, edible food, and how it can be enjoyed by all.



Muskat, founder of No Taste Like Home, poses with a ramp during a foraging tour in Swannanoa on April 6.

Ramps, or allium tricoccum, are native to the eastern North American forests colloquially known by many names, including as ramson, wild spring onions or wild leeks, and have a strong onion-garlicky flavor and aroma.

The Market Place’s spring menu is peppered with dishes and drinks featuring ramps, at 20 Wall St. in downtown Asheville.

From May 11-14, Chestnut restaurant, 48 Biltmore Ave., will offer a prix fixe course ramp-forward dinner menu, with wine or beer pairings, for four nights.

“If there’s one ingredient that represents Western North Carolina, it’s ramps. A lot of chefs get excited about it,” said Chestnut’s Executive Chef Brian Crow.

Wild asparagus, stinging nettles, strawberries and Morrel mushrooms are among the other wild foods regional chefs are enthused about introducing to their menus each spring, and ingredients one may find while foraging or hiking in WNC.

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ANALYSIS

Executive order on voter list challenged

Experts: Rollout would be ‘logistical nightmare’

Josh Meyer
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump’s executive order seeking to create a federal list of U.S. citizens eligible to vote in each state – and instructing the U.S. Postal Service to move toward sending mail ballots only to verified voters – is already meeting significant legal challenges.

But even if it prevails in the courts, Trump’s latest effort to take federal control of U.S. elections before the November midterms would be logistically impossible to implement, elections experts say.

Trump has said for months the federal government could – and should – nationalize the voting process to crack down on fraud and prevent what he calls cheating by Democrats to win elections.

There’s virtually no evidence to support such claims of widespread voter fraud; some Democrats and voting rights experts have said the extremely rare instances where it does occur are the result of mistakes, not intentional efforts to sway an election.

In signing the March 31 executive order, Trump directed his administration to compile lists of who is eligible to vote in states and for the federal government to figure out a way to mail ballots only to those who meet that criteria.

It also specifies that the Department of Homeland Security should coordinate with the Social Security Administration to create lists of voting-age U.S. citizens who are residents of each state and transmit them to state voting officials – who already maintain their own voter rolls – at least 60 days before an election.

In an Oval Office event announcing the order, Trump offered few details except to say “this came up with some great legal minds” helped devise the new system.

“They looked at the various documents and everything that was going on, because the cheating on mail-in voting is legendary,” Trump said, repeating a claim he has made often without providing evidence. He further stated, again, that “Democrat leaders, guys like [Senate Minority Leader Chuck] Schumer, who are corrupt, they want to use it for cheating.”

The move escalated Trump’s bid to place new restrictions on voting ahead of midterm elections that will determine which party controls both houses of Congress for the last two years of Trump’s second term.

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Ramps

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Yet, ramps continue to be in their heyday as the most highly sought after ingredient of the season.

“They’re iconic to the region. It’s something that’s quintessential to the beginning of spring. It’s like the rebirth of the year,” Dissen said. “Used in the right amount, it adds a different twist that is really the flavor of Appalachia.”

Ramps’ popularity can be detrimental to the species as it has driven people to overharvest them to meet demand or to make a profit, prompting the yearly reminder to practice sustainable foraging methods to ensure they’re around for many more seasons.

Ramps typically grow at higher mountain elevations for about six weeks per year, from late March through May, depending on the growing year and climate conditions. In the Appalachians, April 15 is not only “Tax Day” but “Ramp Day,” as it’s the pinnacle time of ramp harvesting.

“It’s like a treasure hunt. As a chef, it’s like you get to put the treasure on the plate with these wild foods that come from the forest,” Dissen said.

Searching for ramps after Tropical Storm Helene

Crow and Dissen, like many others, are secretive about the locations of their go-to ramp patches, to protect their bounty. The chefs also look to foragers who can access the ramps for them.

Alan Muskat, founder of the foraging tour company, No Taste Like Home, takes guests through forested areas and other properties rich with wild foods to teach them how to identify and safely consume ingredients.

No Taste Like Home used to offer a dedicated ramp foraging tour, but has had to roll the experience into its regular foraging tour as there is less certainty about ramps’ locations after Tropical Storm Helene. In the fall of 2024, the historic, deadly storm pummeled WNC with heavy rainfall, caused landslides, toppled trees and washed away pathways and vegetation. Muskat said that it has made some known ramp patches inaccessible.

“There are things impacted in growth because of the ecology shifting, so when you lose a lot of older Oaks, for example, which is what we lost during Helene, you can lose a lot of things that are symbiotically partnered with those Oaks,” Muskat said.

Ramps prefer moist, soil-rich forested grounds that are shaded by trees. Muskat said he’s also concerned that the absence of trees may affect ramps’ growth, and leave them without protection from the sun.

Dissen said he noticed sprouting earlier than usual this year, citing the abnormally high temperature spikes in March as a reason. However, the drastic temperature drops and cold snaps that followed made for an unstable environment.

Muskat said the issue is more than about ramps and local poaching.

“The entire earth is being destroyed by climate change and other human-caused devastation. If you care about the environment, then you have to change the entire way we see ourselves on the planet,” Muskat said.

Share the wealth, forage responsibly

Ramps grow in the wild, but that doesn’t mean they’re a free-for-all. And if one comes across ramps during a hike, consider the best, and legal, way to enjoy them.

Ramps take nearly seven years to grow and mature, so overharvesting depletes the population. Clipping a ramp above its base, leaving the small, white bulb and roots in the ground, or taking a leaf clipping, are popular sustainability methods. And foragers are urged to only take what they need, leaving enough for others.

“When folks go out in the forest with a shovel and dig them out of the ground, roots and everything, think that that took seven years to get to that point. If you go out and pillage the forest floor, it’s going to take time for them to come back, or you can eradicate them from an area,” Dissen said.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, in April 2025, Nantahala National Forest law enforcement confiscated nearly 425 pounds of illegally harvested ramps in a suspected large-scale ramp poaching operations.

The arrested parties were charged with misdemeanors, facing up to six months in jail and/or fines up to \$5,000 per charge.

“Ramps have been harvested sustainably by Chero-



Ramp potato bisque at The Market Place. PROVIDED BY JOHNNY AUTRY/THE MARKET PLACE

kee and Appalachian communities for generations. But we’re currently seeing a decline in our populations. We need foragers to show a greater degree of care, or these ecosystems may struggle to recover,” Maria Dunlavey, a Forest Service botanist, said in a news release.

The poached ramps were donated to the community, including fire departments, police departments and area churches, so as not to go to waste.

The U.S. Forest Service allows foraging of ramps and select other wild products in small quantities, and issues limited commercial permits for ramp harvesting in some districts. Foraging is illegal on the Blue Ridge Parkway and in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Foragers should review the regulations for the area they’re planning to canvas before setting out on their wild food hunt.

“I see people in the same spots that I go to and they’re pulling the roots, and it bares out. Each year, you see a patch and notice that same patch is never as fruitful as the previous year,” Crow said.

Crow said that Chestnut refrains from purchasing ramps from suppliers if they have roots attached.

Muskat said that he has practiced sustainable clipping, as well as replanting roots in the same or other areas.

Consumers may see vendors selling ramps with roots still attached, but Dissen said it may not automatically mean they’re wrongfully harvested. For example, the seller may have access to private lands with large quantities where they can harvest the ramps in portions, leaving other plots to continue growing. However, roots should give the buyer pause, and prompt the consumer to ask questions about sustainable growing and harvesting methods.

“A lot of times, when people sell them with the roots still attached, that’s more weight so they can sell them for more. Typically, you pay a little more for the sustainably harvested ones because that takes more time,” Dissen said.

Where to find ramps in WNC restaurants, markets

No Taste Like Home’s foraging tours includes a prepared tasting of wild foods found along the journey. Guests may take their findings home, or arrange with a participating restaurant, like The Market Place, to include the ingredients in a purchased meal. Foraging tours, and the shorter, leisurely inner city wild food strolls, may be booked at notastelikehome.org.

“They can come for free, or whatever they can afford. We don’t turn people away on these tours,” Muskat said.

Ramp festivals, dinners and events

- Chestnut. Coured prix fixe ramp dinners, May 11-14. 48 Biltmore Ave., downtown Asheville. chestnutasheville.com

- The Market Place. Seasonal menus Tuesday-Saturday. 20 Wall St., downtown Asheville. marketplace-restaurant.com

- 96th annual Ramp Convention. Waynesville American Legion, 12 p.m. May 3. Gate admission \$10. Ramp dinner \$10. Details on Waynesville American Legion on Facebook.

- Ballplay-Tellico Ruritan Club’s Annual Ramp Festival. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. May 9, Tellico Plains Community Center, Tellico Plains, Tennessee.

- Ballplay-Tellico Ruritan Club on FacebookWhitetop Mountain Ramp Festival. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. May 17, Mount Rogers Fire Hall, Whitetop, Virginia. graysoncountyva.com

- (Past) Rainbows and Ramps. March 28 in Cherokee. visitcherokeenc.com/event/2026-rainbows-ramps/

Wild Goods, another local foraging business and tailgate market vendor, offers a free Ramp Sustainability 101 guide, and sells ramps seeds, with instructions on how to grow them, on their website, wildgoods.org. Foraging tours and wild food dining experiences are also offered at a cost.

The Appalachian Sustainability Agriculture Project (ASAP) offers a farmers market guide at asapconnections.org, or visit the WNC Farmers Market. This season, Blue Ridge Market in Woodfin offered ramps and potted ramps.

Those who find themselves with a fresh batch of ramps can easily incorporate them into dishes by substituting garlic for them.

“It’s a little bit sweeter than garlic. I like to say that it’s a cross between a leek and garlic, and you can use it in multiple ways,” Crow said.

Ramps can be sautéed, pickled, puréed, added into a soup or butter — the possibilities are endless.

Crow said that by dehydrating the leaves, one can make a ramp powder that can be used to make a ramp ranch. Or char the ramps on the grill before serving a meal. Ramp pesto is a popular use, which may be used in assorted dishes, including over pasta and potatoes.

Ramps and ramp-infused products are most likely to be found at local farmers markets and roadside produce stands. Tailgate market regular Honey Badger Bakes was offering ramp cream cheese to add to its freshly baked bagels. Well Seasoned Table sells Wild Ramp Sea Salt.

WNC restaurants often announce ramp menu specials on social media, such as ButterPunk, which offered Ramp Pesto n’ Goat Cheese Scones in late-March. Red Fiddle Vittles features ramps, sourced from Wild Goods, in various dishes on its spring menu.

However, due to ramps’ limited supply and season, these items are not likely to be featured for long.

“If we don’t manage how we harvest seafood species from the ocean or wild food from the forest, it may not be their for us to use for years to come or for future generations,” Dissen said. “I want my children to be able to enjoy these things. Like your parents said, ‘If you want things to last, you’ve got to take care of it.’”

Tiana Kennell is the food and dining reporter for the Asheville Citizen Times, part of the USA TODAY Company, covering the food and beverage industry, including the James Beard Awards, Michelin Guide, restaurant openings, closings and other hospitality industry news and events.

Tips, comments, questions? Email tkennell@citizen-times.com or follow @PrincessOfPage on Instagram. Sign up for AVL Bites and Brews, our weekly food and drink newsletter here.



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