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Between two ferns

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By Alex Féthière



Bracken fern growing on a sandy bank. Taller ferns can be beacons for younger ones, but don't harvest them: the taller they get, the more astringent they are. *(Courtesy of Danielle Howard)*

Over a recent lunch of shrimp curry, kicharee and pasta with nettle pesto, our friend asked whether we had eaten fiddleheads before. I said sure, in the northeast, but not in Washington.

Unsurprisingly, these are two different ferns. In the interest of nipping confusion in the bud, I once again must resort to scientific names: the fern I knew from Massachusetts is the ostrich fern, *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, and the fern to which our friend was referring is the bracken fern, *Pteridium aquilinum*.

The ostrich fern is unconditionally delicious. Enough people cherish them that they can be found at farmers markets throughout New England. By contrast, there is a reason that you haven't seen the bracken fern outside of Asian grocers.

We picked a colanderful and took them home to prepare according to Hank Shaw's instructions on the website Hunger/Angler/Gardener/Cook, <http://www.honest-food.net>. There are so many ways to

prepare bracken fern that the head spins at choosing one.

The various methods are not only occasioned by the versatility of this spring vegetable. They all strive to eliminate a withering medicinal bitterness (and a carcinogen) that has to be leached first.

Ptaquiloside is a toxin that has been linked to throat and gastric cancer in regions where bracken ferns are eaten as part of a traditional diet. It can also prevent absorption of vitamin B1.

There's been a lot of research in China, Korea and Japan, but the upshot (according to Shaw) is that one should eat bracken ferns in moderation. After all, many Koreans are no more going to leave bracken fern out of bibimbap for fear of cancer than Americans are about to forswear bacon for the same reason.

The first place to minimize ptaquiloside and bitterness is in the harvest. Do not pick shoots longer than 8 inches, which naturally precludes picking any that are unfurled. Should you be tempted, be aware that the aforementioned pharmaceutical bitterness abounds in these however you process them.

It is crucial to leach fiddleheads before preparing. Using Shaw's method, I boiled them for two minutes in water salted to seawater salinity, then shocked them in ice water for an hour.

Being health-conscious, I ignored his instructions to prepare them with large quantities of butter. We agreed that everything tastes better with butter, and we didn't want to hide the bracken flavor.

More butter does soften the bitterness somehow, and we ended up using great lashings of it on the remaining shoots. It turned out that the smaller ones were the tastiest, smacking of almonds, asparagus and kale - but mostly almonds. Even the steam coming off the boiling pot smelled like amaretto.

Next time I'll try a Japanese preparation: soaking it overnight with a pinch of baking soda. Or I might essay the Korean method of steeping in hot water for three hours, then rinsing in a few changes of water, then soaking in cold water overnight. As with all wild foods, there is a practice to harvesting and preparing that learns to account for their natural variability. A couple of friends who have tried bracken fiddleheads opined that the extensive boiling to clear the bitterness also leaves them bland and insipid. I think the long-term cold water soak that is key to Asian preparations must leave the fern taste intact.

Our friend had recommended boiling them in a couple of changes of water. Because I love preservation almost as much as cooking, I will try the traditional Korean method of making gosari: boil in salted water, pat dry, then dehydrate at 150 degrees Fahrenheit for 24-48 hours. That way they can go in the mail!

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