Turnip Talk

*By Keia Mastrianni // **Illustration by** Julia Marshall*

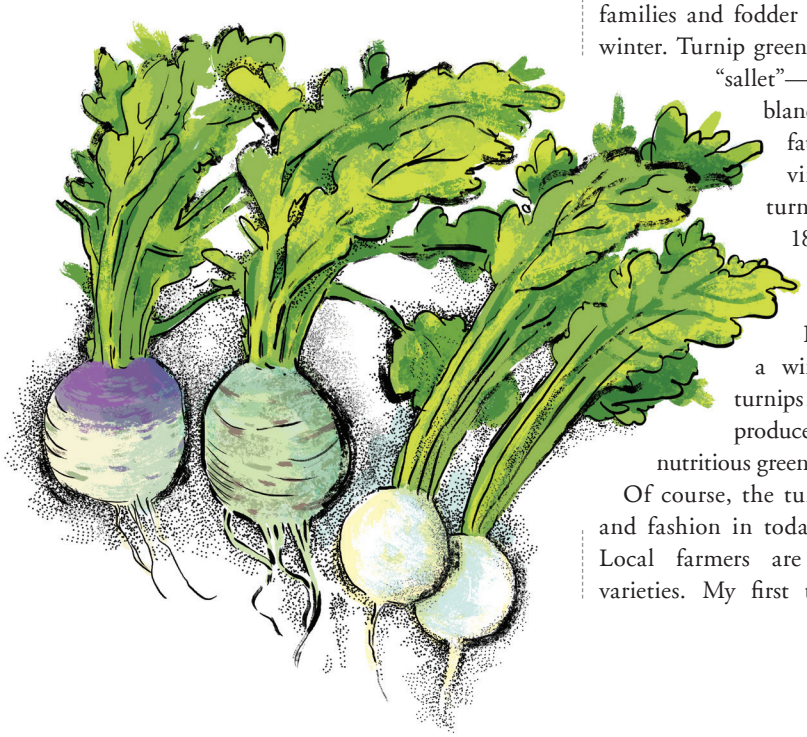
NOVEMBER brings the cool bite of winter's onset, the promise of first frost, and the increasing odds for nights spent indoors near the soup pot—the perfect time for the turnip. In fact, sweater weather (and a hard frost) only makes this humble root vegetable sweeter and more tender.

Turnips are a vegetable I've come to love in my adult life, the direct result of having a farmer in the house. I didn't eat them as a child; in fact, they existed on my "vegetables as punishment" list with other brassicas like brussels sprouts and cabbage. My partner, Jamie, grew up in a rural county of Western North Carolina; he says he hated turnips as a kid. His grandparents were fond of the purple-top turnips, a standard Southern variety prized for its biennial sustenance that produced both nutrient-rich greens and a satisfying root bulb. In his early childhood household, turnips got boiled and mashed with butter. But the memory that sticks with him most—and the one that averted his early inclination to eat the vegetable—was the unmistakable funk that permeated the whole house when turnips met a pot of hot water. It lingers.

Throughout history, turnips have run the gamut of likeability, both loathed and revered across cultures and time. In the days of the Roman Empire, turnips were used as weapons, hurled at unpopular public figures as a means of terrorizing them. But in sixteenth-century Japan, turnips were gifted to emperors, named in honor of the prefectures from whence they came, and praised for their colorful hues. A few turnip varieties, like the Tokinashi and Tokyo Market, are part of a lauded group of traditional Japanese vegetables known dento yasai. In the seventeenth century, turnips contributed to a revolutionary system of four-year crop rotation. The use of clover and turnips in rotation with wheat and barley helped replenish the soil for plantings, nourish livestock (which, in turn, fertilized the soil), and kept fields from laying fully fallow, thus increasing agricultural production.

For all of their positive attributes, turnips have been unfairly categorized across centuries as a food of desperation. Those who ate the food that fed livestock were looked down upon, and names like "turnip eater" were introduced to classify a person, often from a rural upbringing, as a country bumpkin. Other crude terms associating turnips with negative stereotypes arose, such as "falling off the turnip truck," a phrase used to insult a person's intelligence.

In the South, turnips and their greens were a means of hearty sustenance for rural folk. They stored through the season, providing food for families and fodder for animals well into the winter. Turnip greens were commonly used in "sallet"—a simple dish of greens blanched, sautéed in pork fat, and dressed with vinegar. The Seven Top turnip, cultivated in the 1830s, was known for its peppery leaves and was a popular pick for sallet. Planted in the fall for a winter harvest, Seven Top turnips lack a root bulb, and instead produce an abundance of nutritious greens.



Of course, the turnip is back in full force and fashion in today's local food landscape. Local farmers are growing a wealth of varieties. My first turnip straight from the fields was the Hakurei turnip, petite and ivory white, crisp and perfectly sweet. It eats like an apple. Just pluck it from the ground, give it a rinse, and take a bite. Hakurei turnips are a favorite of the culinary set, often harvested when they reach the size of a ping-pong ball and plated in its entirety with leaves still attached to the bulb. They are delicious gently sautéed in butter and lightly caramelized. Another interesting variety is the Hinona Kabu, a turnip that dates back to fifteenth-century Japan. The Hinona Kabu is long, like a slender carrot, and bi-colored—with fuchsia-colored tops and a bright white base. Traditionally, the Hinona Kabu is eaten pickled. The Japanese call it Sakura Zuke, or Cherry Blossom pickle. Other varieties with superior flavor include the Golden Globe, a delicate golden-hued variety, and the Hida Beni, a red turnip that adds texture and brightness when grated raw into a salad.

So when winter settles in, add turnips to a comforting stew, or toss them in the roasting pan to catch the drippings of a winter bird. Just don't discount them. Turnips have been around for centuries for good reason.

Turnips in Brown Butter

Serves 2

4 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 pound Hakurei turnips, greens attached, halved
Salt to taste

In a medium saucepan over medium-high heat, melt butter. Continue cooking butter until it begins to brown, swirling the pan. Once butter smells nutty, add turnips cut-side down, sprinkle with salt, and cook 2 minutes. Lower heat, then give it a stir. Continue to cook until softened and lightly caramelized, about 7 more minutes. Serve warm. Cook in batches, if necessary, so as not to overcrowd the pan.