

Hilda Minter's Spicy Escarole

Birmingham, Alabama

In 1988, Hilda Minter's husband, Joe Minter, a retired construction worker, received a message from God directing him to create a sculpture park depicting the African American spiritual experience in their backyard in the Woodland Park neighborhood of Birmingham. Their property abuts a historic African American cemetery, and the notion of painting the verse from John 3:16 on the tailgate of a pickup truck or His Word Is Real on a defunct movie theater marquee gave her pause. When her husband paid homage to the American workingman by welding giant rusty wrenches to a cross, Mrs. Minter made her favorite spicy escarole. When Mr. Minter was heralded as a visionary genius, she made bigger pots of the escarole for the busloads who began to make pilgrimages to his sculpture park. "We were put here to make things and give them away," said Mrs. Minter, a retired nurse's aid. "People don't expect escarole to be so sweet and spicy. That's why I like it; it make me think and I like to watch what it does to people too."

3 tablespoons bacon grease or olive oil
1/4 pound thickly sliced spicy pressed sausage
such as pepperoni, chorizo or soppressata,
cut into 1/4-inch dice
2 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper
4 heads of escarole (2 1/2 pounds), dark outer
leaves removed, inner leaves coarsely chopped
2 cups diced stewed tomatoes, fresh or high
quality canned
1 tablespoon minced oregano
1 to 2 teaspoons salt
Black pepper to taste
Cider vinegar or lemon juice to taste

Heat 2 tablespoons of the bacon grease or olive oil in a large soup pot over high heat. Add the spicy sausage and garlic and cook over high heat, stirring constantly, until the garlic is golden, about 2 minutes. Add the red pepper and stir. Add the escarole in batches and cook. Add the tomatoes and oregano; season with salt and pepper and bring to a boil. Cook over low heat until the escarole is tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Remove from heat, cover, and allow to sit for 10 minutes. Season with additional salt, pepper, vinegar, or lemon juice to taste and serve with cornbread or beans or both.

Serves 4 to 6

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