

The Benefits of Bitter Greens: Plus the Perfect Broccoli Rabe Recipe

4 MIN READ

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You know when you can just tell something is good for you?

That's how I feel when I eat any of the so-called bitter greens that start to appear in the produce aisle this time of year. Broccoli rabe (also called rapini) tops my list of favorites, closely followed by endive, radicchio, and mustard greens.

These veggies are truly nature's medicine, packed with health-protective phytochemicals and other nutrients. I feel downright virtuous eating them. Their strong flavor won't appeal to everyone. But with just a bit of love, even the bitterest of greens can be tamed enough to appeal to most people. Read on to learn how.

What are Bitter Greens?

These edible leaves and, in the case of rapini, stems and florets, mostly come from the Brassica family, kin to cruciferous cousins broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, and radishes.

Bitter greens include leafy plants like arugula, bok choy, broccoli rabe, collard greens, chicory, dandelion greens, endive, escarole, kale, mustard greens, radicchio, swiss chard, and watercress. Their distinctive bitter or sometimes peppery flavor is due to chemical compounds called glucosinolates, which mix with an enzyme called myrosinase when chewed. The resulting bitterness is likely protective, scaring away animals or other predators. But not us!

Meanwhile, glucosinolates **are known to offer** antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits, among others. And while they're collectively referred to as "greens," the

color isn't emblematic, as ruby-red radicchio and pale-yellow endive show.

Cooking can mellow the bitterness, but many of these greens, including arugula, chicory, endive, escarole, kale, radicchio, and watercress, are enjoyed raw. The right ingredient pairing can make the greens less bracing, and more herbaceous and savory, with just a hit of pepperiness.

Bitter Greens Have Superpowers

Like many leafy vegetables, bitter greens are great sources of vitamins K, A, and C, as well as folate, a B vitamin essential for red blood cell formation. They are also rich in minerals such as calcium, magnesium, and potassium, and packed with fiber.

But bitter greens “also offer some unique nutritional advantages,” explains Caroline Susie, a registered dietitian nutritionist in Dallas.

- ■ **Glucosinolates**, in addition to their antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties, also support liver detoxification and may protect against cancer
- ■ **Inulin**, a prebiotic fiber, that supports digestive health, blood sugar levels, and immunity
- ■ **Polyphenols**, which may reduce the risk of diabetes and obesity

How to Eat Bitter Greens

Bitter greens are common in Mediterranean cooking, which makes sense considering the diet's longevity credentials. Added to soups and stews, tossed with oils and nuts, and served with citrus, salty cheese, or fatty olives, the bitterness is tempered but the other complex, vegetal flavors remain. Susie recommends a few cooking techniques to tame the greens' bite:

- ■ **Blanching:** Dropping bitter greens in boiling water for up to 60 seconds, then

immediately transferring them to an ice bath

- ■ **Roasting or sauteing:** High or fast heat combined with a hearty oil like avocado oil
- ■ **Braising:** Simmering the greens in broth along with an acid, like lemon or vinegar, and aromatics like garlic and onion. “This not only reduces bitterness, but also layers in flavor,” she says.

Interestingly, even as the bitterness is tempered by cooking, the most beneficial phytonutrients remain. **Research finds** up to 40% of the most beneficial bioavailable molecules in brassicas are reconstituted in the intestines, even when the compounds are diminished in cooking.

Easy Tips to Make Bitter Greens Taste Amazing

For raw preparations, massaging bitter greens like kale with a bit of salt, lemon juice, or olive oil breaks down the plant fiber, releasing some of the bitter compounds and making the leaves more tender. America’s Test Kitchen **found** that massaging kale first, and then rinsing it, helped further tame the bitterness. Pairing flavors also helps, Susie says.

- ■ **Acid or sweetness:** Lemon juice, balsamic vinegar, honey or agave will balance the greens by reducing the intensity of the bitterness and providing a contrasting flavor.
- ■ **Salt and fat:** Salt acts on our taste buds to reduce perceived bitterness, and fats “can soften sharp flavors,” Susie explains.

For example, in the classic salad pairing of radicchio, pear, walnut, and blue cheese, the bitterness of the radicchio is tamed by the fat and saltiness of the cheese, the richness of the nuts, and the sweetness and acid of the fruit. Yum.

In other words, it’s well worth your time to get to know bitter greens. Your taste buds, and your health, will thank you.

Recipe: Sauteed Broccoli Rabe

Ingredients:

- ■ 1 bunch Broccoli Rabe, rinsed, dried, and stems-ends trimmed. Remove any yellowing or damaged leaves.
- ■ 2 T avocado oil
- ■ 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- ■ Fresh lemon juice
- ■ Kosher salt, large pinch
- ■ Red pepper flake, pinch
- ■ 2 T water
- ■ 2 tsp. agave (or honey)
- ■ (Optional) flaky finishing salt like Maldon, to taste

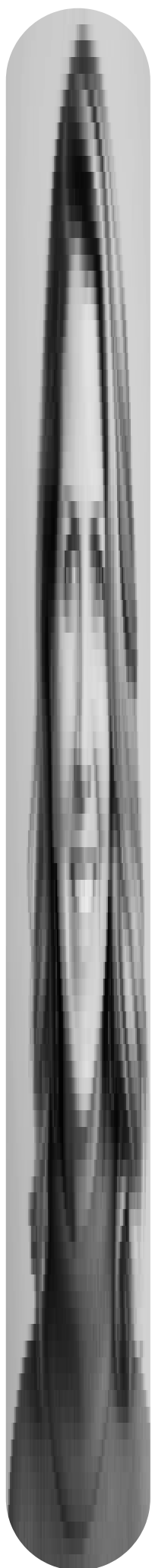
Preparation

1. 1 In a large skillet, heat oil on medium.
2. 2 Add garlic and sauté until just golden, about 1 minute.
3. 3 Add broccoli rabe and a large pinch of salt, and sauté, tossing the greens to cover with oil, for about 2 minutes. Add the water to the pan (it should sizzle) and cover, letting the rabe braise until just tender, 3-4 minutes. It will turn bright green.
4. 4 Remove the cover, and add a pinch of red pepper flake and a big squeeze of fresh lemon juice to the greens. Toss to combine the flavors. Turn off the heat when all the water has evaporated.
5. 5 Drizzle the greens with agave or honey, and toss to distribute the sweetness.

6 Optional: Drizzle the greens with agave or honey, and toss to distribute the sweetness.

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