

## Broccoli Raab and its Cousins

Rapini (also known as Broccoli Rabe (or Raap or Raab), *Broccoletti*, *Broccoli di Rape*, *Cime di Rapa*, *Rape*, *Rappi*, *Friarielli* (in Naples)) is a common vegetable in the cuisines of southern Italy, Galicia (northwestern Spain), and China. The plant is a member of the brassica family along with cabbage, broccoli, kale, turnips, bok choy, and many others. Rapini has many spiked leaves that surround clusters of green buds that resemble small heads of broccoli. Small, edible yellow flowers may be blooming among the buds. The flavor of rapini has been described as nutty, bitter, and pungent.

The best Italian broccoli raab are from Puglia and Campania, and are quite leafy, with slender stalks; in terms of flavor they are pungent in a turnipy sort of way (the word *rapa* means turnip), with pronounced mustard overtones. In the United States the D'Arrigo brothers, two Sicilians who pioneered the shipping of Californian vegetables to Boston in the 1920s, developed a variety with juicy stocks, many buds, and smaller leaves that they felt would appeal more to American consumers; by comparison with much Italian broccoli raab it's also more mildly flavored. Rapini is now grown throughout the world. Rapini is available all year long, but its peak season in the Northern Hemisphere is fall to spring.

Rapini's cousins, the flower bud variety of Asian greens, includes Happy Rich, Green Lance, and Hon Tsai Tai. These Asian greens feature plants that you want to let go to flower. While most plants in the broccoli family turn bitter when allowed to flower, the flower bud types of Asian greens have flowers that are meant to be eaten, buds and all. Chinese kale (choi sum, gai lan) is the most noteworthy of the flower bud types. Like the Italian broccoli raab, this vegetable is harvested with its stem, leaves, and flowers and is used in sautees and stir fries. The flavor is stronger than broccoli, but like most greens, cool weather tempers the taste. The flower, leaves, and stems are all edible, although the stems can become woody close to the base.

The cultivated vegetable probably descends from a wild herb related to the turnip that grew either in China or the Mediterranean region. Rapini is similar in shape to the Chinese *Brassica oleracea* cultivar called *kai-lan*. But what are they? Broccoli raab (*Brassica rapa* var. *cymosa*), which are also known as *cime di rapa* in Italy, are a wilder member of the broccoli family with small, fairly loose florets intermingled among the leaves of the plant; by comparison with broccoli, broccoli raab are much leafier and one eats the entire plant. They first appear in Italian markets in late November/early December, and they persist through March, or even April if it stays cold.



Broccoli raab are low in calories and sodium. On the other hand, they're rich in calcium, vitamin C, vitamin A, vitamin B2, phosphorous, and are also a good source of protein and fiber. They are also a good source of folate, which helps prevent spina bifida, and are therefore often recommended to pregnant women. And finally, they contain compounds that protect the heart, lungs, and intestines, and are thought to be cancer preventing. In short, they are quite healthy.

A common preparation involves sauteing rapini with garlic over low heat for 10 - 15 minutes.