

# The Spice of Life



Brian Greunke

**I**t began on a whim around 15 years ago. Fremont, NE Branch 89 letter carrier **Brian Greunke** came to take care of a plot of horseradish that his late uncle had planted in his aunt's back yard. The vegetables had "just kind of sat there" after that, he said.

One day, a clerk in Greunke's former station, Gregg Miller, gave a jar of his ground horseradish to Greunke to try. "I wasn't a big horseradish fan," the carrier said, "but I put some in my bloody marys that I make, and, oh, I fell in love."

He soon mentioned his uncle's plot and Miller came over and asked if he could dig it up. He did so, and Greunke helped and learned. The next year, Greunke, a 30-year carrier who serves as Nebraska State Association president and Branch 89 president, got involved with Miller in the process from start to finish.

Horseradish—a hardy root vegetable used as a spice and condiment—will grow downward, the carrier said. After the top, called a "crown," is cut off, it can be transplanted, and in about five years it's ready to be dug up with a long, skinny shovel called a tile spade.

"You get as close to the plant as you can," Greunke said. "Then you just kind of pry on it, and you'll hear it pop, and then it'll come out. It'll be the tops—it's like a carrot. Even the leaves on it are very similar. So, it grows up like that, but carrots don't grow back the next year. Once you pop it off, it will come back. It propagates itself, basically, is what it does."

As a bonus, he adds, horseradish as a crop is almost impossible to kill for a lot of people.

He and Miller continue to do one harvest per year. "You have to dig it in months that end in 'R'—so September, October, November, December. We always do it in October," he said.

Greunke begins by going to his two to three patches or fields to check them out. The carrier tries not to dig up the horseradish more than two or three days before they grind it, and he'll keep the freshly plucked horseradish in the fridge in the meantime to maintain freshness.

"A good-sized horseradish root is about a half-inch diameter," he said. "Anything less than that, it's really hard [to work with]."

Before grinding the roots, Greunke will peel them with a potato peeler and put them in water to take some of the dirt off. "After it's soaked for a while, then we run it through the grinder," he said.

Once Greunke has his own peeled, Miller comes over with his dug-up bounty of horseradish and the two peel Miller's together, clean them up, and cut the tops off. They grind them up in Greunke's garage, using a hand grinder that they have "to crank by hand," Greunke said.

"So, when we [are] standing right over the top of it, the fumes—when the oils get released—it's like pepper spray. Our eyes are swollen shut. We're crying. We have to walk out because it's like tear gas."

Greunke got an electric grinder for Christmas, which they plan to take on its maiden voyage alongside the old grinder this year.

Once they have the roots ground, they put them in vinegar, which helps

Greunke digs up the horseradish plants to get the roots. The crowns can be used for replanting, while the roots are peeled, ground and soaked in vinegar. The horseradish is then put in straight-sided jars and can be frozen.



temper the horseradish's potency. "We learned the hard way, back when we were hand grinding it," Greunke explained, "We dumped it into this big stock pot, and we found out later why our first batches were so hot—because the longer you let it sit without putting vinegar on it, the hotter it gets."

Now they do small batches to get it right. It takes three good-sized roots to fill a jar because it is finely ground. "We get those big foil lasagna pans, and we just grind four cups. Then we add one cup of vinegar, one cup of water, and then two tablespoons of pickling salt, and that's it," he said, noting that they've dabbled with different recipes over the years and modified it into one they like.

People have told them that the hotter and drier it is in your area, the hotter the horseradish. Last year, the weather was really hot, so they put more vinegar in it. "It's just trial and error," Greunke said. "The first couple of batches we sample, we do quality control."

Once it's soaked for a bit, they stir it up, use a canning funnel to keep jar rims clean, and ladle the horseradish into straight-sided jelly jars with serving spoons. One of them will tap the jar to make sure it's full, and they seal the lid on by hand. "Once we get rolling, it goes pretty quick," Greunke said, "and then we divvy it up between the two of us."

Greunke tends to refrigerate a few and freeze the rest. They don't sell it, and don't plan to. "We give it away to those wanting to spice up their lives," Greunke said. "I load a bunch of boxes in my car and go spread my Columbus Day cheer."

They've got a list that keeps growing as people find out about their hobby, including letter carriers. "We know who we've given to in the past, and that's why we both freeze, like, 20 jars—in case there's people that call, text: 'Do you have any more?'" Greunke said.

"It's sought after," he added. "I mean, you go to the store and you're paying for stuff that's ultra-processed and it's just not as good. But I'm kind of partial."

Greunke has a few favorite ways to use his horseradish: "I make my own shrimp cocktail—it's just ketchup and horseradish. I do the bloody mary," he said. "I make creamy horseradish with sour cream for prime rib or steak. Another one: You get smoked salmon and you take a cracker. You put just a little bit of horseradish, and then you put the salmon right on top of it, and that's like a really good hors d'oeuvre."

The pungent vegetable contains many nutrients and antioxidants and has some noted health benefits such as improving digestion and fighting inflammation. It's even known as a "superfood."

The carrier always tells people that they'd be surprised about horseradish. "Not everybody likes it, and that's fine. We're not going to force it on anybody. The option is always there if they want to try it," he said. "I had a buddy who hates it, and I had steak one night with him, and I made some of the creamy stuff with the sour cream, and he said, 'Now that I could do.'"

He joked that he's going to need to find some more untended patches if people keep deciding they need more spice in their life. **PR**

