

COOKING WILD GAME ©

BY: VICTORIA RUMBLE



When the hunter or angler chose to return home with his catch the cook sometimes prepared it a little more lavishly than was possible in an outdoor setting, and such foods as **venison, turkey, fish, shellfish**, etc. along with the ever-present pork and corn dishes were usually at the heart of Southern diets.

For hunters and fishers Southern food has changed little over the years from what it was when women like Mary Randolph and Mrs. A. P. Hill recorded their recipes. [For more on these ladies see the chapter, *The Age of Cookery Books*].

Before any game, fish, or shellfish could be cooked it had to be dressed. These techniques were a part of every day life and known universally. When a period recipe instructs *to draw* the game, it means to disembowel (remove the entrails).

In drawing birds or poultry, or removing the entrails, a very small slit may be made under the vent [place for discharge of excrement Webster's 1856] with a pen knife at which slip in the fore-finger, and if there is any internal fat about the vent draw it out as it is in the way of taking out the entrails, and, if left in, would be very strong when roasted. Next get hold of the gizzard, which may be known by its being the hardest part of the interior, draw it out carefully; it will generally bring the whole of the intestine with it, but if the liver should be left, again slip in the finger and take hold of the heart, which will bring out with the liver; which you must not touch for fear of bursting the gall-bladder. The heart is generally left in by poulterers, but it is much better out, as it is apt to give a bloody appearance to the interior of the fowl. Trim around the vent with a pair of scissors. [1864]

Some sources instructed not to draw **woodcocks, snipes** and similar small birds stating the trail [entrails of a fowl] was a delicate part of the bird while others proclaimed this a nasty habit. Other sources instructed leaving the heads on some birds – namely **woodcocks, snipes, moor fowls** [red grouse], **partridges, pigeons**, and **canvas-back duck**. Some sources instructed that **rabbits** and **hares** be trussed with the head on.

At times almost any bird in the U.S. was eaten for food including **robins, larks, and sparrows**. When these birds fed on grain and insects the flesh was delicate and rich. Birds that fed on carrion were considered by most to be disgusting, and any that fed on fish from lakes and streams were expected to have a strong “fishy” flavor.

Dr. Smith pointed out that cranes, **bustards**, **curlew**, and **herons** had been eaten by the Norman invaders but because they feed on fish, frogs, etc. their strong taste had generally rendered them unacceptable as food for most mid-Victorians.

Among the animals regarded as game he listed **hares**, **pheasants**, **partridges**, **grouse**, **heath-game** [grouse family – known to take cover in heaths or overgrown areas]; **moor-game** [**red-grouse** or **gorcock** – known to frequent moors or areas swampy, overgrown, and with poor soil quality], **black-game** [**black grouse**, referred to also as **black cock** – wild beasts of a black color], and **bustards**. By the mid-1880's **woodcocks**, **snipe**, **quail**, **land rails**, and **conies** [**rabbit**; quadruped of the genus *Lepus*] were protected in some areas.

Peacock [pea-hen] and swans were still occasionally eaten in the U.S. by the 1880's, though less frequently than in former decades. **Widgeons** [duck family – fed off grasses], **cygnets** [young swan], **water-hen** [rail family, so named because of its resemblance to the barn-yard fowl], **capercailzie**, **teal**, **wild geese**, **goslings**, **wild ducks**, **canvas-back**, **prairie-hen**, **partridge**, **pheasant**, **Guinea fowl**, **turkey** and **larks** were commonly eaten throughout the century.

Myra Inman was so thankful for a dinner of **partridges** in January 1865 she recorded it in her Civil War era journal.



Leviticus XI names wild-fowl that were considered unclean, primarily because they were flesh-eating birds, and unsuitable for Jewish families: **eagle**, **ossifrage**, **ospray**, **vulture**, **kite**, **raven**, **owl**, **night-hawk**, **cuckow**, **hawk**, **little owl**, **cormorant**, **great owl**, **swan**, **pelican**, **gier eagle**, **stork**, **heron**, and **lapwing**.

An 1864 article instructed the following method of preparation of rabbits and hares.

Remove the entrails as soon as dead, and the skin just before cooking. Epicures keep them until the fibre begins to soften before dressing. The inside of the body must be kept dry, and it is well to dust it with pepper and salt. To skin them proceed in the following manner: Cut off the legs at the first joint, raise the skin on the back, draw it over the hind legs, and strip it from the tail, then slip it over the fore legs, and cut it away from the head and neck, leaving the ears on the head as perfect as possible. Wash them well, dry with a towel inside and out, and proceed to truss them. Cut the sinews of the hind legs, turn them towards the head and fasten them to the sides of the hare or rabbit; then turn the fore legs to meet the hind legs, and fasten both with skewers. The head is crowded a little back, and fastened in place with skewers.

The method of trussing varied with type of bird and whether or not the head was left attached, but the basic method was to secure the legs at the joint, and pass a skewer through the body. When

the head was attached it was generally tucked under a wing. String was used for securing the legs and for attaching to the skewer. When the head was removed the skin was pulled over the bone of the neck.

Lettice Bryan instructed how to cook any variety of **fowl**. Some of her game recipes were stewed **duck**, boiled **duck**, hashed **duck**, baked **duck**, roasted wild **duck**, roasted **pheasant**, roasted **partridges**, broiled **pheasants** and **partridges**, roasted **woodcocks**, **feelarks** [sic] or **snipes**, roasted or boiled **pigeon**, roasted **pea-fowl**, boiled **pea-fowl** (peacock), roasted **hare**, boiled, roasted, or fried **rabbits**, stewed **rabbits**, grilled **rabbits**, fricasseed **rabbits**, smothered **rabbits**, and stewed, broiled or fried **squirrels**.

Mrs. Bryan devoted an entire chapter to the preparation of **venison**, and recipes included roasting, boiling, baking, stewing, hashing, frying steaks, broiling steaks, venison pudding, venison pastry, and savory venison.

The latter {SAVORY VENISON) was a method of making sausage. A haunch of fresh **venison** was cut away from the bone and mixed with one fourth its weight in pork fat. These were finely chopped and seasoned with nutmeg, cloves, salt, pepper, sage, thyme, parsley, summer savory, sweet marjoram, and sweet basil. Claret was added to help moisten the mixture and probably helped to preserve it. The sausage was put into "potting cans" and butter put over the top (most likely melted, poured over the meat, and allowed to harden sealing out the air), and the cans set away in a cool place. In "extreme cold weather" she stated it kept for weeks thusly prepared. When it was to be eaten the sausage was made into "cakes", dipped in beaten egg yolk, dredged in flour, and fried to a light brown.

One of Mrs. Bryan's more unusual recipes was for RABBIT SALLAD.

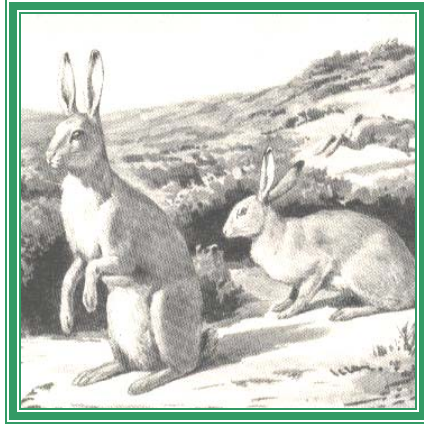
She instructed the young **rabbit** be boiled until tender and finely minced. To this was added an equal amount of minced head-lettuce. The dressing was prepared by mashing 6 boiled egg yolks and stirring in a teaspoonful each of salt and pepper, half a gill of vinegar, half a gill of made mustard, and four tablespoonfuls of sweet oil. When smooth the dressing was poured over the rabbit and lettuce and tossed with a fork. She instructed this be served for the evening meal with plates of bread and butter, crackers, grated cheese &c.

In the South common rabbits and hares included the **Gray Rabbit**, and the **Swamp Hare**.

Period references indicated that Jewish people did not eat **rabbits** because they fell outside Jewish food laws. Any animal fit for consumption was to have cloven hooves and chew its cud. While a **rabbit** was agreed upon as chewing cud, it did not have hooves. Esther Levy's *Jewish Cookery Book* published in 1871 does not have recipes for **rabbit** or **hare**.

Rabbit meat was considered close in taste, texture, and nutritive content to hen than any other meat. It is light in color, without a strong flavor of its own, and was considered easily digested making it suitable for invalids and convalescents.

Flesh of the **hare** and **leveret**, however, are darker, of a firmer texture, and possessing a stronger flavor than the rabbit. It was considered among the most nutritious of meats. Like venison, hares were thought best when aged as it improved the flavor and broke down the fibers to tenderize the meat.



In 1863 *Peterson's* published this general guide for the preparation of wild game. This magazine was published in Philadelphia so during the war years the majority of its readers were in the North, delivery being difficult in the South, but the techniques changed little throughout the century.

Jugged hare was as much esteemed in Britain as hare soup was in France. It was also being prepared in the U.S. prior to the war years as evidenced by Frederick Skinner who wrote in 1887 of his memories of a finely prepared meal. He stated that in France hare soup was so much esteemed that it was sometimes prepared with cat in the absence of a hare.

It should be noted that many families constructed ice houses in which to keep game throughout the year. A properly built ice house would keep ice almost year-round when it was cut in large chunks from frozen ponds and streams in winter, put into the ice house, and packed well in sawdust and/or hay, and in these ice houses game would last a very long time, even in warm weather.

There were two methods of constructing ice houses. The first was begun by digging 8 or 10 feet into the ground and building a house from the bottom up extending four to ten feet above the surface.

Another was to construct the building entirely above ground, and then build another building inside the first with walls 18 to 20 inches apart. This space was filled with pulverized charcoal or tan bark. The floor was covered 12 to 15 inches deep in a layer of tan bark. The floor absorbed any moisture and kept the air dry. Rye straw was sometimes used for the roof. The buildings including the roof were sometimes constructed entirely of logs. *Farmer's and Emmigrant's Handbook* 1845.

Dr. Edward Smith stated, "**Squirrels** are not eaten in this country", [New York] but declared them to be "an agreeable and highly nutritious food." He went on to say that it was common in the "Western" parts of the U.S., especially in heavily wooded areas, to eat them. The flesh was considered dense and gelatinous and he advised they were "luscious and satisfying".

Dr. Smith acknowledged that **raccoons** were eaten, but specified no particular geographic area where this practice was indulged in, or method of preparation.

Much of what was eaten through the end of the 19th century in the U.S. is to be found in sources far more obscure than cookery books. Sources include books on hunting, fishing, camping,

woodcraft, magazine articles, zoology and ornithology books, newspapers, medical treatises, and even the Bible.

Goat meat was for many years commonly consumed in Switzerland and other mountainous areas. The flesh of the kid was appreciated more in the U.S. than the goat because it was tenderer and its flavor was thought similar to venison.

Meat from **wild pigs** was considered tougher and stronger in flavor than that of domestic hogs. They had less fat than their domestic counterparts, and more gelatinous matter.

In some areas **buffalo** were still to be found into the early 19th century and hunted though the flesh was much tougher, and darker in color than other animals. This did not deter hunters from shooting them when they had an opportunity though often the only parts of the meat consumed were the hump and tongue.

A species of **antelope** found in Africa were imported to the U.S. but were found too cost-prohibitive to raise for food. The antelope, on the other hand, was much appreciated, and some thought it had a somewhat smoky flavor. One source compared its flavor to rat.

By the 1880's **kangaroo** tail was being imported to the U.S. and it was used primarily for making soup. The Giant Kangaroo was discovered by Capt. Cook in 1789 and often weight up to 140 lbs. Its flesh was considered excellent, and the animal was much hunted in Australia, and by the 1850's had been taken to England and bred there. Its hide was used for shoes and gloves. The black-striped kangaroo of New South Wales was also hunted for food and leather.

The idea of eating **horses** and **asses** though repulsive to some must have met with less prejudice from others or else Dr. Smith would not have felt compelled to report its merits and shortcomings in 1886. "The flesh of the horse and the ass has been long known to be good and nutritious food, and in quality it occupies a place rather among wild than domesticated animals."

Its shortcomings were lack of flavor, toughness of flesh, and the idea that horses were noble beasts with a purpose in life which precluded their being slaughtered for food except in the case of older animals past their usefulness in which case the meat was felt inferior enough to be of little merit to any but the lowest class persons.

For more information see:

Victoria's Home Companion, and *Outdoor Recreation and Leisure in 19th Century America* by Victoria Rumble, and available through this website.

Articles from www.thistledewbooks.com have, in most instances, been published in various magazines, and may not be reproduced or republished without written permission of the author, Victoria Rumble. © 2004.