Alligator Meat Available
In Area Seafood Markets

By MARY ALICE FONTENOT

First you catch an alligator. Then you make the roux.
This was the way it was in the old days, when swamp living was easy and alligators could be had for the taking.
This was when hunters and trappers killed alligators to get the hides. Most of the meat was thrown away, but some hunters kept what was considered the choice meat of the animal — the tail — for family consumption.
Things are different now. Those who like alligator meat need not go into the swamp and wrestle an alligator for a meal. This season, for the first time, alligator meat is being advertised for sale at Lafayette area seafood markets.
Alligator steaks, at about $1.50 a pound, can be bought in more than 30 stores.
Nowadays, game laws protect the giant lizards of the bayous. For many years alligators were on the “no-no” list and could not be taken legally at any time. Then, last year, due to over population, an open season of 30 days was declared. The 1980 season closed yesterday, Oct. 4.
An estimated 20,000 pounds of alligator meat was sold during the 30-day season.
Cajun people, especially those of the trapper families, have always eaten alligator meat. James Boudreaux of Lafayette, reared in the Atchafalaya Swamp by fisher parents, says he has eaten the meat all his life, finds it especially tasteful when roasted. “You season it with garlic and sprinkle a little lemon juice, then roast like you would pork,” says Boudreaux.
“Only it’s better than pork,” says Judy Leger, wife of a Lafayette seafood dealer.
Judy and her husband Oran are complete devotees to this newest of Acadiana’s gourmet foods.
“I like barbecued alligator ribs,” says Oran. “That’s my favorite. You can also fry the meat, like steak, chicken, or shrimp — but don’t overcook it. It’s like good beef — it toughens if overcooked. If you’re making a gravy, no problem about the time of cooking. You can stew the meat to make a sauce piquante, anything.”
Leger labels alligator meat “beautiful.” He says it is lighter than beef or pork and more economical “because you get more meat for your money.” He added: “Lots of people are trying it. It’s a delicacy — and I haven’t found anyone yet who doesn’t like it!”
The Legers like to fry the alligator steaks, use the less meaty parts for sauce piquante and stew. Recently they had guests from Baltimore. Judy cooked up what her husband described as “a plain old tomato gravy” with the leg bones of a large alligator. The Maryland visitors went back for seconds.
Like the turtle, alligators are said to have different kinds of meat. “Some people say seven kinds, like turtle, others say 12 kinds,” Leger said.
There is little about an alligator that is not edible, but some favor different parts, usually the tail and the jaw. The tail meat is very like the loin of beef, with two sections resembling beef ribs. The meat does not have a “fishy” taste; it has been likened to turtle meat, is said to be a good substitute when turtle is not available.
Licensed hunters, interested mainly in the hides, are allowed to kill 100 alligators per season. They bring their catch to a licensed processor, who skins the animal, returns the skin (worth $12 per foot) to the hunter. The processor pays the hunter 75 cents per pound for the meat, which is then wholesaled to local markets.
Herbert Hebert, one of two local processors, explained that the pattern for skinning alligators changes every year, to cut down on illegal hunting. The new skinning instructions are not released until the first day of each new season. Therefore any poacher who after October 4 attempts to sell a hide skinned according to the 1980 pattern may be in trouble. This method helps game agents detect alligators killed out of season, and skins and meat sold on the black market.
A survey of seven of Lafayette’s best known restaurants reveals that alligator meat is not yet on local menus. And most newcomers to the area would be turned off if offered fried alligator.
This could change. Next season, who knows? It could be that the 1981 edition of the Lafayette Advertiser cookbook may find local cooks vying for the honor of being named Best Alligator Cook in Acadiana...