At Boucherie Cajuns Use 'Everything But Bristles'

BY MARY ALICE FONTENOT

The sub-freezing temperatures that plagued southern Louisiana during January would have been just right for an old-time Cajun boucherie, or hog butchering. Cold weather, preferably freezing weather, was a must for the boucherie in the days before refrigeration and home freezers. Otherwise sticking the animal in the pot to help hold the heat of the water longer and keep the work cleaner.

The boucherie was always a social event of sorts. It was a time for friends and neighbors to get together, to share the work and boucherie treats, then "veiller" and dance late into the night.

Procedures

There were certain time-honored boucherie procedures which were followed punctually. The hog to be butchered was penned up some six weeks prior to the anticipated butchering time and fed on corn to improve the flavor of the meat. The hog then was fed the night before the butchering to facilitate skimming the casing needed for the boudin.

On the appointed day the family of the boucherie host was up before daylight getting things ready. First priority was starting fires under iron wash pots for boiling water to loosen the bristles on the animal.

Light getting things ready. A bed of loose hay is placed near the pots to help hold the heat of the water longer and keep the work cleaner. (Photos by Mary Alice Fontenot)

Some lean meat is boiled for the dressing and even the skin is used to make "gratons," or cracklings. (See more pictures on page 70)

Preparations included making a bed of loose hay near the pots of boiling water. This helped to hold the heat of the water longer and kept the work cleaner. As soon as neighbors arrived (and could down hospitable cups of hot coffee), the men went to work. Skinning the hog was done with dispatch, usually by sticking the animal in the neck with a sharp butcher's knife. Sometimes the animal was shot or bludgeoned, but the "sticking the hog" method was preferred for two reasons: to eliminate curdled blood in the meat and to preserve the blood for "boudin rouge." As the animal was stuck, a pan was kept in readiness to catch the fresh blood to which salt was added to prevent curdling.

Every Cajun farmer was an expert at the various boucherie tasks. First job was removing the bristles. This was done by pouring hot water over the skin animal. The bristles were removed one by one, using a sharp knife. For the second time the hog was moved onto a table, usually a makeshift work table made of boards over sawhorses. Two to three men could terrace a hog without any trouble.

Next, the head and feet were cut off and the head hung to drip on a large nail or spike driven into a nearby tree or post. The remains of the carcass was cut into

kept throughout the winter - if any were left over from boucherie day.

Hog's head cheese, boudin and gratons continue to be favorite wintertime snacks in Cajun country and may be purchased at many food stores and markets in Acadiana. Less known in modern times are other boucherie foods such as "la langue fourree," "chauvin," "plaine," "triladius harefuse" and "viande sale." (Also "boudin rouge." The red boudin, or blood pudding, a preferred delicacy by most old-timers, is seldom made nowadays.

"La langue fourree" is made by cutting a pocket into a hog tongue, stuffing the pocket with highly seasoned chopped lean pork, then baking the whole thing. This was eaten outside for several days during cold weather. The product was usually boiled in

FROM GRATONS TO BOUDIN

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THEIR OWN WORK — Acadian women hold down their end of the work. The women prepare the cooked foods, make the boudin and head cheese, grind the meat for sausage, and stuff the boudin and sausage, using a sawed-off cow horn, called a "boudiniere", to fill the casings with the rice dressing and seasoned meat.

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The skin, with fat attached, was cut into long strips then into cubes. Traditionally the fat was rendered out of doors, in the large iron wash pots in which the water was boiled. A clean stick or wooden paddle was used to stir the bubbling fat. Some expertise was needed here: allowed to overcook, the lard congealed to a yellowish or brownish color and was less palatable. Done just right resulted in a smooth white grease. The hot liquid fat was strained off into containers, usually syrup tins, and set aside to cool. The fat from one hog could last an average family until next boucherie time.

Gratons

By-product of "la graisse" was the crunchy "gratons," or cracklins. Stored hot in tightly covered syrup tins or fruit jars, these could be grilled and served as a snack.

Hog Stomach

"Chaudin" is the stomach of the animal (specifically, the stomach of a hog — the word for a cow's stomach is "ponce"), stuffed with highly seasoned rice dressing and roasted.

Les platines is seasoned pork patties in what the Acadians terms "la voile," a membrane that looks like latticework.

Grillades a marinee is thin slices of lean pork, put into a crock with layers of seasoning, green onions and a sprinkling of vinegar. "Viande salee" or "the salee," is brined pork.

Then was liver stew, kidney stew, pickled pig's feet, in addition to the body of the animal, which was cut into roasts, stew meat, meat for smoked sausage, fresh ground meat for "boulettes." A favorite dish on boucherie day was backbone stew.