The boucherie

Brusly man serious about continuing family tradition for future generations

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The boucherie is a tradition that the men of the family want to continue. It's part of their heritage — a remnant of an earlier time when meats didn't come from the grocery, and it was the responsibility of the man to put meat on the table.

Dolores Gremillion admits she hated the boucherie when she was a young wife and mother in Plaucheville.

"It's a lot of work and makes a mess in the kitchen. But my husband, Newman, loved continuing the tradition and so I helped with it every year. When my son-in-law, Joey Normand, came to me a few years ago and said he wanted to do the boucherie just like my husband had done before he died, I said, 'Oh, Joey, why do you want to do that? Forget the boucherie. It's too much work.'

"But Joey persisted. He even had notes of how my husband had run the boucherie, and he had me read the notes and fill in missing information on how to make the boudin and cracklin. Joey's very serious about keeping the boucherie going from generation to generation," Gremillion said.

The boucherie or butchering of the pig is associated with the Cajun culture in South Louisiana, but actually it is an event common to rural societies throughout the world. As people moved to the city and adopted more urban lifestyles, the customs of the farm were forgotten. In Louisiana, these customs survived to modern times because the boucherie had become more than a way of putting meat on the table. It was a social event with family and friends — a good time.

Families like the Gremillions could remember grandparents and parents hosting boucheries, but in only a few cases was the boucherie the sole source of meat for the family.

Normand enjoyed his in-laws' annual events, and after his father-in-law died, he knew he wanted to continue the tradition for his children. Eight years ago, he moved the boucherie to his home in Brusly and searched for a source for the pigs.

"I found a man in Clinton who raises really lean pigs, so that's where I get them every year," Normand said.

The boucherie begins at daylight. The pigs are picked up and brought back in a truck.

As soon as the pigs get back, the women start cooking the rice for making the boudin, which is a rice dressing stuffed in a casing made from the pigs' intestines.

When the first pig is cut up, the liver is taken over to the women who immediately cook it and serve it hot with homemade bread. That's the authentic boucherie breakfast, says Andrea Normand, Joey's wife.

Besides being a social event, the boucherie is a great deal of work. From 5 a.m. until about 4 p.m., no one sits down, everybody works because once the pig is killed, time is critical. No refrigeration is used, and all the meat and sausage must be butchered, cleaned and processed rapidly to prevent spoilage. The

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boucherie is always done on a cold day.

There is a lot of meat on a pig. And, there are a lot of other parts of the pig that you wouldn't even think about using, such as the skin, feet, head and organs, that are also processed into edible products. The skin is cut up and fried to make cracklin's, a kind of crispy potato chip-like snack food.

The feet and head are cleaned and boiled in a pressure cooker and in making hoghead cheese, a ham-hock variety had often served with crackers.

The organs are used in making the boudin and other recipes, such as chausson, the trimmings stuffed with dressing and debris, a creamy dish served with rice.

Even the blood is used in making blood sausage, or red boudin. The sausage is referred to as white boudin.

The Normands don't make their own horseroot, or sausage. A butcher in Addis, Broussard's, makes the horseroot from the carcasses after everyone has trimmed off the meat for the boudin and the skin for the cracklin's.

While the men are cleaning and cutting up the pig and stirring the cracklin's, the women are making the meat for the boudin, and the children are turning the intestines inside out to make the casings for the boudin.

The children's role is important. Joey Normand likes to have all the kids involved. It teaches them how the pig is butchered and processed as well as continues his idea of passing on tradition.

Normand keeps records on every boucherie in his computer. The files contain recipes, tips, schedules, suggestions for improvements. For instance, this year, he typed in an idea for developing a better drainage system off his driveway where the pigs are butchered and cleaned.

After the boudin is made, it's put into big simmering pots for cooking. When everything is finished and cleaned up, all the guests sit down to enjoy a late afternoon meal of boudin and sweet potatoes. Big pots of coffee and bowls of desserts provide the final course.

A recording of Normand's father, the late Vince Normand, talking about butchering a pig for a cushion do last played while some of the guests took a break.

"You need a lot of beer to do this," Vince Norman said on the tape and chuckled. Doreen Gremillion agreed. "It plays well on your kitchen."

"You know," she continued, "this boucherie is Joey's Christmas. My daughter Andrea made a deal with Joey. He didn't like Christmas and always complained about the holiday. Andrea told him if he was good during Christmas, she would host the boucherie. It's a deal that's worked out for both of them. Andrea gets her traditional Christmas, and Joey gets his.

Joey Normand pours boiling water over the pig carcass so the hair is easily pulled from the skin.

ABOVE: Barry Gremillion cleans the head so it can be cooked to use in making hoghead cheese.

RIGHT: Bea Lafleur, left, Barry Gremillion and Karen Geiger work the red boudin or blood boudin into the natural casings made from pig intestines.

ABOVE: David Gremillion and son Adam, 10, sing the hair off the pig feet before cooking to collect gelatin used in making the head cheese.

LEFT: Mark Anderson, 8, enjoys playing with the pig toes during the Normand family boucherie in Bruin.