

Schmaltz

By Dan Gill, Ethno-Gastronomist

The word *schmaltz* is of High German origin and simply means [rendered] animal fat. Technically, lard and beef tallow are schmaltz, but the word was adopted by early Ashkenazi or European Jews and applied to poultry fats in general and specifically to chicken, duck or goose fat. Since lard is forbidden and butter restricted, schmaltz became the cornerstone of traditional Jewish cuisine and an essential ingredient in many authentic dishes, such as matzo balls and potato pancakes. Prior to the widespread use of vegetable oils and fats during the twentieth century, schmaltz was used in place of butter and lard for frying and as a spread for bread. It adds a depth and richness to most dishes that cannot be obtained with vegetable fats. In fact, there are few authentic Ashkenazi recipes that don't call for schmaltz.

In America, schmaltz also means "overly sentimental" or "mushy". Chicken fat was held in such high regard by Jewish immigrants that merely the mention of schmaltz evokes an emotional response and fond childhood memories. Jewish comedians and performers popularized the term during the early days of radio and television.

When compared to beef tallow or lard, chicken and turkey schmaltz is lower in saturated fats and higher in beneficial monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats and essential fatty acids and is therefore healthier. Several years ago, I researched frying oils and came to the conclusion that, when heated and especially when used for frying, animal fats are actually safer and less detrimental to our health than vegetable fats (in general) because they are more stable and don't break down into dangerous components as readily. As a result, we use good old beef tallow in our deep fat fryers. For the rest of the story, visit our web page and read *Praise the Lard & Pass the Scrapple* as published in the January - February 2008 issue of *Pleasant Living*.

We make and use a lot of turkey schmaltz at *Something Different*. We brine and smoke large turkey breasts for sliced turkey and as a key ingredient in THE Virginia Sandwich spread. Before brining we remove the backs and meaty trimmings for stock and save the neck fat for schmaltz and *gribenes* (cracklings) - the tasty brown bits left after the fat and skin is rendered. We use turkey stock as a base for many of our soups. After the stock is quick-chilled, we skim the fat from the top and render it along with the neck fat.

Though it is usually not displayed for sale, we always have a supply of turkey schmaltz on hand and can sell a limited amount.

Schmaltz is relatively easy to make at home, but does require some attention. Fat and skin trimmings are cut into small pieces and heated slowly until the fat melts. The pan may be covered or a little water may be added during the melting stage to prevent sticking and scorching. I make pure, unseasoned schmaltz and add seasonings when I use it but often a little salt and some aromatics, such as onions or apples, are added during the rendering process for more flavor. Once the fat melts, heat is increased in order to boil off the water contained in the tissues. All of the water must be boiled away or the fat will become rancid. I use a thermometer and render all animal fats to 350° F. or until the cracklings are nicely browned. The rich and luxuriant amber-colored fat is then strained, cooled and packed in airtight containers for storage. It will last for several weeks on the counter, months in the refrigerator and years in the freezer. Cracklings can be salted and eaten as a snack or saved to use in a variety of dishes for additional flavor. I puree turkey cracklings in a little coffee and add them to our gumbo to reinforce the dark flavors of roux.

Because of the high proportion of unsaturated fatty acids, poultry fats are relatively soft. Schmaltz is liquid at room temperatures, so it will not replace lard for flaky piecrusts and biscuits, but it *is* a superior frying oil. It has a relatively high smoking point and crisps and browns foods beautifully without the odor of hot lard. We use a little in the frying pan as a starter oil when searing or braising meats and it is our preferred fat for sautéing onions and frying potatoes or eggs. Covering cooked meat with properly rendered fat to exclude oxygen and microorganisms is among the oldest methods of preservation. The French perfected this method with duck or goose confit. Pork sausage was preserved in a similar manner by frying the patties, packing them in stoneware crocks and covering them with hot, rendered lard.

Though maligned in recent years by mainstream medicine and misguided dietitians, fat is an essential element in our diets. Quality fats are necessary for good health and make food taste better. As with other nutrients, fats should be chosen wisely and consumed in moderation, but not avoided.

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