

Praise the Lard and Pass the Scrapple

By Dan Gill, [Ethno-Gastronomist](#)

Now that the dietary pendulum has swung back in favor of pig meat and lard, precious few of us are left who remember the whys and wherefores of preparing some of the jewels of country living. Cool weather conjures up thoughts of hog killin' and scrapple makin'. Back before refrigeration, hogs were killed in winter so that the meat could be cured and preserved before it went bad. Larger parts, such as hams, shoulders, bacon, jowls and loins were cured, mostly with salt. Meaty trimmings were ground or finely chopped and mixed with salt, pepper and sage to make sausage, which was either fried and packed in crocks, then sealed with hot lard; or it was stuffed into muslin bags and hung in the smokehouse to acquire a tangy "aged" flavor. Salt, pepper, sage and cold weather all discourage the growth of harmful microbes, but encourage beneficials, which enhance shelf life by increasing acidity. Acid, in the form of vinegar, was also used to pickle pigs feet and to make souse. Excess fat was preserved by rendering it into lard.

Lard

There is a growing awareness among enlightened cooks and consumers that the health risks popularly associated with animal fats have been grossly overstated – if they exist at all. Long-term use of processed vegetable oils and the reduction of animal fats in diets have been implicated in many chronic health problems including obesity, depression, asthma, coronary disease, Parkinson's disease, cancer, diabetes, sexual dysfunction, increased blood cholesterol, and dysfunction of the immune system. Recent research confirms that animal fats are much safer than commonly used vegetable fats for cooking, especially for frying. Beyond trans-fats resulting from hydrogenation, it is now known that mono- and poly-unsaturated vegetable oils break down under conditions of prolonged or repeated heating, as in deep fat fryers, to create potent carcinogens and toxic compounds, notably HNE: Naturally saturated animal fats do not readily break down under normal use. As a result of these findings, we switched back to traditional beef tallow for our fryers at "Something Different" over a year ago. The arena of lipid and health research is confusing, rife with controversy and conflicting conclusions which are often dependent upon who is interpreting the data. Consumers really don't know who to believe. I am not qualified to make dietary recommendations, but I am convinced that animal fats, butter and eggs do not need to be avoided by healthy people who wish to remain healthy. We now use either turkey fat (which we render ourselves), butter or lard in our recipes – in moderation, of course.

The best animal fat for frying and baking is good old lard rendered from pig fat. The problem is, most lard available commercially has been partially hydrogenated and treated with potentially toxic anti-oxidants to make it shelf-stable; thereby negating health advantages. Good lard can sometimes be found in farmers' markets or purchased from custom processors, but it is relatively easy to render your own all-natural and healthful animal fats and get to know your food. Though backfat and trimmings are often used, the best lard is made from the "leaf fat" surrounding the kidneys and internal organs of pigs (preferably pasture raised). Leaf lard is white, smooth and mild tasting, and makes the

best piecrusts, biscuits and fried chicken. We have a limited quantity of leaf lard from my own pastured pigs for sale at the store – but when it's gone, it's gone.

This is how you can render just about any animal fat: Trim off any meat, glands or blood; then grind or cut fat into small pieces, and heat slowly in a good heavy pot. A little water and occasional stirring will keep the fat from scorching before it starts to render. As the fat melts, cook uncovered over medium heat and stir occasionally. Use a good thermometer. The temperature will stay around 212°F until most of the water is evaporated, then slowly rise as residual moisture is lost. Take it to about 350°F to keep it from getting rancid during storage. As the fat cooks, the cracklins will rise to the surface and then sink as it gets done. Strain and save the cracklins for cornbread. Keep lard and other rendered animal fats in a cool, dark place, or refrigerate. It will last indefinitely in the freezer. If you did everything right, leaf lard should be a clear brown while still hot, but snow white after cooling.



Primitive sausage mill found and probably made on a farm in the Appalachian mountains of Virginia. The nails and hardware are handmade, the seals are leather and the blades are broken straight razors. There was a conical shaft with iron pins arranged in a spiral to cut and auger the meat as it turned Photo by Dan Gill

Scrapple

After the hams and bacon have been put down in cure and the sausage is all ground and the lard rendered and the feet pickled and the snouts soused, you take what's left, mostly the head, and make scrapple. Now, I have seen a lot of modern recipes for making scrapple. Most say to start with a shoulder or some such good piece of meat. Blasphemy! Everybody knows there are better ways to use a shoulder. Such wanton waste would not have been tolerated back when times were tight and folks had to make the most of what they had. Besides, head meats have unique tastes and textures, as anyone who has tasted *barbacoa de cabeza* can attest, and definitely makes the best scrapple. If you have to use store-bought meat, look for shoulders. You will need some skin and cartilage for gelatin; therefore, the picnic end will work better than the Boston butt. You could also include a few feet for the same reason.

Here's how we used to make scrapple back when I was young. Nothing was ever measured – it was made by feel and taste.

Ingredients:

1 Grandmother to make sure everything is done "just so"
1 Mother to do most of the preparation. Overseen by ingredient #1
2 Children, big enough to stir the pot but not smart enough to be elsewhere
Hogs' heads (number depending upon how many hogs were killed)
Hearts and about ¼ of the livers
Various and sundry scraps not used to make other delicacies
Salt, pepper, sage and maybe a little celery salt to highlight the flavors (optional)
Cornmeal (not self-rising), preferably stone ground white but plain yellow works fine

The feature attraction is the cleaned head. Remove the eyeballs (the brains were removed on killing day and scrambled with eggs the next morning). Break the head(s) into manageable pieces with a cleaver, and cook them down in a kettle of boiling water until the meat is easily pulled and the gelatin is released from the skin and connective tissue. Skim most of the fat from the stock and save. Pull all of the meat from the heads and chop up the chunks. Cook the liver and heart and whatever else wasn't used in other delicacies and grind them separately. Get a tote-sack full of corn meal and keep it handy. Put the meat, heart, and other scraps (except liver) back into the simmering kettle of stock. Add liver until you can taste it but the liver flavor does not predominate. Add salt and celery salt - the cornmeal will take a lot of salt so you get this mixture fairly salty. Stir. Taste. Add sage and pepper to taste - not too much, now. Stir. Taste. Pass the spoon around so everybody can pass judgment. When it's right, you should taste salt first, then liver (but not too strong), rich pork meat flavor and a hint of sage. When everybody, especially Ingredient #1, agrees that it couldn't possibly be better, bring out the cornmeal and kids.

Now comes the hard part! Slowly stir in the cornmeal with a long wooden spoon - not too much at a time, now. Keep stirring. Add cornmeal. Add some fat. Keep stirring. Add cornmeal. Add some fat. Keep stirring as the mixture starts to get thick. Keep stirring. Not thick enough yet. Add a little more corn meal. Keep stirring. A little more fat until there is a slight sheen to the surface but no visible oil. Keep stirring.

"Just where do you think you're going? Get back here and stir that pot!!"

As the mixture thickens and you fine-tune the ratio of fat to cornmeal, it will start to separate from the sides of the kettle – a sure sign that it is done and will set properly. This is a good thing 'cause the kids are about tuckered. Ladle it into lightly greased, shallow, rectangular or square tin pans to a thickness of about 2 ½ inches. Be careful - it's still hot! Start slapping it down with the palm of your hand. Slap it like you mean it! SLAP IT! If you are doing it right, your hand should be beet red, sore and covered with a light coat of pig oil. Good. Now let the pans cool, cover with waxed paper and put them in the Frigidaire or cool pantry.

Next morning, remove scrapple from the pan and slice about 3/8" thick. Lightly flour both sides. Heat about ¼" of bacon grease or lard in an iron skillet until it just starts to smoke. Fry until the outside starts to crisp but the inside is still soft. Drain briefly on a paper towel. Serve with syrup and eggs.

There's nothing else like it in this world!!

Something Different Country

Store and Deli

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