

Squirrel and Other "Weird Meats" Get Gourmet Makeover

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Dean Marrazzo eats just about anything that's not moving. At least, not moving once he "harvests" it. The hunter - who's up at 5:30 many mornings in hot pursuit of white tailed deer - has sampled alligator, squirrel, rattlesnake and even frogs. Don't even think about calling it road kill.

"It makes for a very elegant meal," says Marrazzo, who was born in the Bronx and now has a restaurant in Tuckahoe, New York, where he films a hunting show called "Suburban Adventures with Joe & Dean." "I like serving squirrel with a great bottle of wine - it tastes like a bird. Alligator tastes like rich chicken. I eat it battered and fried, like fritters."

Though he hasn't personally consumed skunk, possum or raccoon, he says friends have tried - and enjoyed - these furry creatures.

Some might squirm at the very thought of eating something that runs, hops or slithers around your backyard. That's nonsense, says Marrazzo. He says squirrel is popular now - "big time" - and he prepares it like a cacciatore, with a light tomato sauce.

Not that he was concerned anyway, but now Marrazzo doesn't have to worry about toxins in his critter fritters. New Jersey had warned consumers near Ringwood months ago to limit squirrel consumption after the feds believed they had found lead in a dead squirrel. It turned out to be a false reading. At fault was a defective blender used to puree the squirrels.

Marrazzo, who hadn't fretted about this anyway, is much more concerned with getting people to warm up to the idea of eating weird meats.

"The problem is that eating squirrel is just not socially acceptable," laments Marrazzo, who never serves squirrel or other unorthodox meats at his steakhouse. "With my show, where we cook what we harvest, I am trying to pull in women who want to take part in their husbands' hobbies, but don't want to go into the woods."



In Dean Marrazzo's Tuckahoe, N.Y., restaurant, he serves relatively tame dishes like this wild turkey - but he's eager to spread the word about less conventional game.

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Of course, there's weirder stuff to eat than squirrel and possum. On a blog called, simply, weirdmeat.com, bloggers describe eating baby bee larvae, deep-fried sand worms and lizard soup. Here, too, are books for sale with names like "Strange Foods," "Extreme Cuisine," and "Unmentionable Cuisine."

Besides furry critters, the weird meat category also encompasses some of the more bizarre parts of animals that we already eat.

Tom McAliney of Brandt Beef, which supplies restaurants like the Ritz Carlton Downtown, says bone marrow is "huge" now as an appetizer. After broiling it until it's gelatinous, chefs serve it on toast so diners can scoop it out. It's beloved for its intense flavor.

"These weirder items are getting more popular," says McAliney. "Chefs want customers to keep coming back. How many times can you offer someone the same T bone steak or filet mignon?"

Meanwhile, serving squirrel can be a cheap meal, assuming you hunt one down yourself. But don't get too excited just yet.

"You really need like four squirrels per person for an appetizer," says Marrazzo. "And I can eat eight squirrels for my main course."

Here are some recipes - untested by yours truly, who prefers to see squirrels alive and trying their darndest to get into the bird feeder.

Cajun Squirrel

Serves 2-4

4 tablespoons olive oil
 6 squirrels, cut into serving pieces
 1 teaspoon Cajun spice or to taste
 1 large onion
 1 large green pepper
 2 cloves garlic
 2 tablespoons Tabasco sauce
 4 tablespoons catsup
 1 tablespoon Gumbo File seasoning
 Cooked rice

In Dutch oven or deep pot, heat olive oil. Season squirrels with Cajun seasoning. Add to hot oil and brown on all sides. Continue to cook until done. In blender, place onion, green pepper and garlic. Cover with water and chop. Add to the pot with the squirrel. Sprinkle with Tabasco sauce, catsup and Gumbo File. Stir to mix. Serve over cooked rice.

Chicken Fried Squirrel

Serves 4

4 squirrels, quartered and cleaned
 2 cups buttermilk
 Old Bay seasoning to taste
 1 cup flour
 Salt and pepper to taste
 Shortening for deep-frying

Soak squirrels in buttermilk for an hour. Combine Old Bay seasoning and flour. Add salt and pepper. Heat shortening to 375 degrees in an iron skillet or deep fryer. It should be deep enough to cover the meat. Shake or roll the squirrel in the seasoned flour. Fry until the coating is golden brown. Remove and place on rack to drain. Bake for half an hour in a preheated, 275-degree oven.

Squirrel in a Crock-Pot

Serves 2 to 3

4 to 6 dressed squirrels, cut into serving pieces
 1/4 cup soy sauce
 1/4 cup water
 1/4 cup firmly packed brown sugar
 3 tablespoons lemon or lime juice
 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger

Place squirrel pieces in CrockPot. Mix all remaining ingredients in a small bowl and pour over meat. Cover and cook on Low heat for 7-8 hours. To thicken gravy, use either flour or cornstarch mixed with water. Cook on High until thickened.