Research Introduces New Meat

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Iowa State research has discovered the food possibilities of muskrat, says Norma Dale

Until recently valued only for its fur, the muskrat is now coming to the fore as a replacement for familiar meat dishes which since the war are rationed and scarce. At Iowa State, Miss Anna M. Olsen, formerly of the Foods and Nutrition Department, is experimenting with muskrat cookery in order to encourage its use on American dinner tables.

Miss Olsen, in cooperation with Dr. P. Mabel Nelson, of the Foods and Nutrition Department, Dr. George Hendrickson, of the Zoology and Entomology Department, and the Iowa Game Conservation Committee, has been conducting research with edible game for the past year.

Musquash, Indian for muskrat, is the name which has been adopted by Miss Olsen and her co-workers for this meat, which can be prepared in innumerable ways. Preparatory to cooking it is necessary to soak the musquash carcass at least 12 hours in a weak salt or in a sweetened, weak vinegar solution in order to draw out the blood and to reduce the gamey flavor.

The musk gland should be removed and care must be taken to avoid cutting into these glands because of the disagreeable odor which may result.

Young muskrats, like young rabbits, may be fried or broiled. The older carcasses, however, should be cooked for a longer period of time and more slowly. When served in fricassees, casserole dishes, meat pies, croquettes, chop suey, as roasts and other ways suitable for mature meats, the musquash is highly palatable.

The flavor of the musquash has been likened to that of the wild duck or to the terrapins found in Chesapeake Bay. People who object to the characteristic gamey flavor of the musquash, Miss Olsen suggests, may find the barbecued meat more desirable.

Dark red in color, the meat of the musquash is finely-grained and tender. Previous prejudice against the meat is probably due to a lack of skill in cooking or to carelessness in skinning the animal.

Although it is only now becoming known in the Middle West, the flesh of the musquash is by no means an untried food. Sometimes also called marsh rabbit, the animal was esteemed by the aborigines of North America, and the voyagers, trappers and hunters ate it roasted over the coals of the campfire. Muskrats are sold extensively in some Eastern markets. Because they are trapped for their fur and the additional labor of preparing the meat for market is slight, the musquash can be purchased cheaply and is bought and eaten by all classes of people.

The animals for these experiments are obtained by the Iowa Game Conservation Committee. Principally a vegetarian, the musquash feeds on the roots and stems of aquatic plants. Fresh meat from the animal is available during the open trapping seasons, extending from November to April, depending upon the various state laws.

Among the suggested recipes for musquash which have been published are baked muskrat, wine-fried muskrat, broiled marsh rabbit, smothered muskrat, stewed muskrat liver, pickled muskrat, muskrat meat patties and muskrat salad.