

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Pickle Meat

Pickled pork, or as New Orleanians like to call this cured delicacy, "pickle meat", is an essential seasoning ingredient for red beans and rice, as well as other Creole and South Louisiana dishes. Companies like Richard's and Savoie's label their version of this product with phrases like "Real Cajun", while locally Vaucresson's Sausage Company of New Orleans (established 1899, but whose processing facility was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina) calls their product "Creole Pickled Pork", and proudly mentions a "New Orleans 7th Ward tradition of adding salted, pickled pork to accompany our greatest dishes." They boast, "You can't make gumbo, red beans and rice and greens without it ... that would be sacrilege!!!"



Pickle Meat before it enhances a pot of red beans and rice

The cut of meat used for pickled pork is very often the "Boston butt". Despite the fact that this name might lead one to believe this has something to do with a Yankee *derrière*, the butt of the pig is not at all the rear end of the animal, which is called the ham. The butt is actually the upper section of the pig's front shoulders. The pig's shoulder tapers down to its foot, and the wide end at the top is separated from the tapered end. This wide section is called the butt, which derives its name from the casks or barrels, also known as "butts", used in the storage and shipment of some pork cuts in the 18th century.

The butt (from the medieval French and Italian *botte*) was half a tun, ranging from 475 to 480 liters. The imperial butt (sounding like it was meant for the imperial throne) was 105 imperial gallons and the U.S. butt was 126 U.S. gallons. A tun, not a ton, is a liquid measurement (actually an English wine cask unit).

These pork cuts were not as highly valued nor located as high on the pig as others, hence the expression living or eating "high on the hog". As to Boston, U.S. methods for cutting pork apparently began there, and the manner in which the hog shoulder was butchered in the Boston area became referred to there and in other regions of the country as "Boston butt".

Because of its high percentage of connective tissue in Boston butts, the meat needs to be cooked slowly in moist heat, and this slow-cooking process softens the tissue and melts the fat, making the butt very flavorful and juicy.

Commercially, curing salts are used in the pickling of pork and other meats. This process of food preservation is employed to prevent or slow down spoilage by fungus or bacteria. Besides pickling and curing meats, these curing salts are used as part of the process to make sausage. Two types of common curing salts are Prague powder #1 (94% table salt and 6% sodium nitrite) and Prague powder #2 (which also contains sodium nitrate). Both Prague powders are lightly dyed pink to blend better colorwise with the meat to be cured and to distinguish it from common table salt.

In days gone by, long before refrigeration and commercial curing plants, uncooked boneless cured pork was a staple in the Creole kitchen. Then as now, the pork becomes very tender from the brine, so that it breaks down in the pot, leaving behind a flavorful seasoning and delectable meat accompaniment. One can also add his or her favorite sausage to the red beans. There's more than enough room for both sausage and pickle meat in the pot.

In the Crescent City, Camellia Brand® dry beans, peas and lentils are by far the leading supplier of red kidney beans to a loving populace. Lucius Hamilton Hayward founded the company (L. H. Hayward and Company) in 1923 after moving to New Orleans from Meridian, Mississippi, to establish himself as a wholesale supplier of fresh fruits and vegetables. By 1984, 95% of all packaged dry beans sold in the city of New Orleans were Camellia □Brand®.



Camellia Brand® Red Kidneys and the accompanying ingredients

Realizing the importance of seasoning the locals' red beans and rice, Camellia □Brand® offers a recipe on their website for making one's own pickle pork:

Ingredients:

- 1 (6 1/2 pound) pork shoulder roast
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1/2 cup kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 3 cups apple cider vinegar
- 5 cups water

- 2 large onions, sliced
- 1 head garlic, separated, peeled & crushed
- 4 tablespoons mustard seed
- 4 bay leaves

Directions:

1. Trim pork roast of excess skin and fat. Cut roast in half along the bone; remove bone and reserve it for other uses.
2. Cut pork into 2-inch pieces; score a 1/4-inch slice into the surface of each piece.
3. In a large bowl, whisk together brown sugar, salt and red pepper. Dip each piece into the brown sugar mixture; rub seasoning well into meat and shake off any excess.
4. Divide pork chunks into 2 large zip-top freezer bags; let stand at room temperature 2 hours.
5. Combine remaining brown sugar mixture, apple cider vinegar, water, onion, garlic, mustard seed, bay leaves and peppercorns in a large saucepot (not aluminum) over medium-high heat; bring to a boil. Simmer 5 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool to the touch.
6. Divide cooled brine evenly into each zip-top bag, squeeze to remove air and seal. Refrigerate at least 1 week, turning each bag once daily.

Remove pork from brine; freeze or use within two weeks.

In Caroline Merrick Jones' *Gourmet Guide to New Orleans* (first printed in 1933), she suggested cooking "Red Beans Louisiana Style" with "1/2 to 1 lb. salt meat, lean and fat" only after having "been cooked slightly (either fried or boiled)" and added to the bean mixture "slowly, stirring until thoroughly done." She also recommended not adding the salt until "toward the end" or one "may have the disastrous effect of toughening the beans."

In Louisiana's pre-"ice-box" days, the pork from a very recently butchered pig would be cured in large batches, and then stored in barrels. A 1901 recipe in *The Times Picayune's Creole Cookbook* explained the process:

"Pork should be pickled about twenty hours after killing. It is pickled always in sufficient quantity to last for some time, for if proper care is taken, it will keep one year after pickling; but it may also be pickled in small quantities of three or four pounds at a time, reducing other

ingredients in the recipe according to quantity of pork used. To twenty-five pounds of Pork allow one ounce of saltpetre. Pulverize thoroughly and mix with a sufficient quantity of salt to thoroughly salt the pork. Cut the Pork into pieces of about two pounds, and slash each piece through the skin, and then rub thoroughly with the salt and saltpetre mixture till the meat is thoroughly penetrated through and through. Mash the cloves very fine and grind the allspice; chop the onions. Take a small barrel and place at the bottom a layer of salt, then a layer of coarsely chopped onions, and sprinkle over this a layer of the spices and minced bay leaves. Place on this a layer of Pork; pack tightly; then place above this a layer of salt and seasonings, and continue with alternate layers of Pork and seasonings until the Pork is used up. Conclude with a layer of the minced herbs and spices and have a layer of salt on top. Cover the preparation with a board on which a heavy weight must be placed to press down the meat. It will be ready for use in ten or twelve days."

Saltpetre, of course, is potassium nitrate (something one may have used to make gunpowder as a "young scientist"). Can't do those things anymore.

Here's a simpler, more modern recipe for pickled pork:

- 2 pounds very fresh boneless pork butt, cut into 2-inch cubes
(use pork shoulder, or Boston butt)
- 1 quart distilled white vinegar
- 1/2 cup mustard seed
- 1/2 medium white onion
- 1 tablespoon celery seed
- 2 tablespoons Tabasco sauce
(or 1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper)
- 1 bay leaf
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled and cracked
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- one dozen black peppercorns
- 1 pinch Prague powder (described above)

Combine all the ingredients except the pork into a 2 quart non-reactive saucepan and bring to a boil for three to four minutes. Cool and keep in a refrigerator container (plastic, glass or stainless-steel) and (after the mixture is completely cold) add the pork. Stir to remove any air bubbles. Cover and refrigerate for three or four days before using.

Or one can simply buy one of the many fine commercial products like Savoie's and Richard's (sealed in plastic bags). Vaucresson's, in an effort to rebuild its business, has begun to provide an abbreviated

product list that can be purchased at present on the internet (with more products to be added over time). They hope to have their facility back up and running in the near future.



Post-Katrina Vaucresson's on St. Bernard, co. N. Roman

In a 2007 article in *The New Yorker*, the writer (who was from New Jersey but came to New Orleans by way of Colorado) was getting advice from Crescent City natives (black and white) on how to season some local specialties:

"Then you got to get some pickle meat," said a gray-haired "African-American man". After rooting out "a plastic package that looked like bacon", he instructed, "You take and boil this separate," and "Then you cut this up, too, and put it in the greens."

A "reedy young white man in overalls" chimed in, saying he had never heard of "pickle meat till I came to New Orleans. We don't have that in Mississippi. My mama boiled greens with ham, but my wife uses that pickle meat, too, and they're right — It's good."

He's right — It's fantastic!

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