Have a bite of 'Old Maude'...

Finding mule's place at the table

Now, with the turkey reduced to hash and Christmas menus being planned, is a good time to consider mule meat, a favorite entree of the besieged and desperately hungry.

The mule has an honored place in North Carolina, although not on the dinner table. Benson, in Johnston County, holds an annual Mule Day when this beast of intolerable burdens, including denial of parenthood and conjugal pleasures, is showered with appreciation. Ironically, the celebration takes place hard by I-95, along which traffic flies and no sensible mule would tread.

The mule's place in Southern history is fixed and secure, largely in the diary of John D. Austen, the Confederate chief telegrapher at Port Hudson, the South's last Mississippi River stronghold in the Civil War. The diary recently was presented to the state of Louisiana by Austen's descendants and is available for public consumption.

A memorable passage in the diary was entered on Port Hudson's 43rd day of siege by the Yankees. All of the meal, rice, bacon and lard were gone by then, and the gallant defenders were casting about for something to eat. That's when the lowly mule won its place in Confederate history.

"This day we had mule steak for dinner for the first time," Austen wrote. "I partook of it most heartily, and indeed found it good. It is equal at least to the poor quality of beef which we sometimes have been compelled to eat."

Port Hudson surrendered five days later, having held out for nearly a week longer than Vicksburg, probably on the strength of the mule meat.

I have to go along, up to a point, with John Austen's assessment of mule

meat as table d'siege. It is indeed edible, if a trifle chewy and on the sweet side. In texture and taste it can't compare with roast cat, but is more filling. Mule sticks to your ribs, as Granny used to say of oatmeal, while cat qualifies practically as an hors d'oeuvre.

My first encounter with mule as table fare was 40 years ago when I was under siege by the Germans. Well, not exactly under siege; I was in a German prisoner-of-war camp. The fare was skimpy, depending heavily on German bread, made of sawdust and spread with denatured axle grease, and ersatz coffee, made from burned peanuts.

The arrival of the mule, on a flatbed truck, hooves sticking straight up, ready for butchering, was greeted with cheers and sustained applause, the sort of jubilation that attends the presentation of a particularly fine animal in Benson on Mule Day.

We didn't get steaks, there being about 1,000 of us having to make do with one mule. So, I can't speak with authority on that particular cut. We had a fine mule stew, garnished with a dehydrated German vegetable that turned black in water.

At times these days, dining in one of Chapel Hill's standard eating places, I look back on that mule stew with a certain longing.

The roast cat came later, at another prison camp, and was as much a lark to break the monotony as it was a game effort to ease the hunger pains.

A couple of light-hearted souls caught the stray cat, fed it for several weeks on whatever was at hand, toning up the flesh the way you top off a steer, and then held a cat roast. There wasn't enough for a genuine eat pickin'; it was more of a tasting, like at a Tupperware party. Once you get over the idea, cat isn't half-bad.

Still, everything considered, I'll take mule. There is something warm and intimate, if not altogether elegant, in saying, "I believe I'll have another helping of old Maude there."

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