

Cooking Salt Pork – By Charles Heath

“Got a skillet? Fry it. Got a couple of rammers? Broil it. Got a mess cup? Boil it. Got a board? Bake it!” OK – so you want more data than that!

BACKGROUND

What is Salt Pork? Let’s start with a primer on different kinds of pork that one might find at an event. While this is postwar information, one of the best descriptions of salt pork varieties is directly from the 1886 edition of The Grocer's Handbook:

- Mess: "Mess Pork shall be packed from sides of well-fatted hogs, cut in strips not exceeding six and one half inches wide and flanked according to diagram as nearly as possible, and not back-stripped, 196 pounds of green [not cured] meat, numbering not over sixteen pieces, including only the regular portion of flank and shoulder cuts; four layers to be packed in each barrel, with not less than forty pounds of Turk’s Island, St. Utes, or Trepanné, or 45 pounds of other good qualities of foreign or domestic coarse salt, and clear brine as strong as the salt will make it."
- Clear: "Clear Pork shall be packed from sides of extra heavy, well-fatted hogs, cut, selected and packed in the same manner as Mess Pork, the backbone and half the rib next to it be taken out."
- Extra Clear: "Extra Clear Pork. Same as clear, except that all the ribs and backbone shall be taken out."
- Mess Ordinary: "Mess Ordinary, or Thin Mess. Of hogs reasonably well-fatted to light for Mess Pork, cut, selected, and packed in the same manner as Mess, no restrictions whatever as to the number of pieces to the barrel." [This is what you will be receiving during At High Tide. – Ed.]
- Extra Prime: "Extra Prime Pork shall be made from heavy, untrimmed shoulders, cut into three pieces, according to the diagram, the leg to be cut close to the breast; to be packed 200 pounds of green meat in each barrel, with the same quantity and quality of salt as Mess Pork."
- Prime: "Prime Mess Pork shall be made of shoulders and sides of nice, smooth and fat hogs, weighing 120 to 170 pounds each net, regularly cut into square pieces, as near 4 pounds each as possible, the shank to be cut off close to the breast; each barrel to contain 200 pounds of green meat, the proportion of 20 pieces of shoulder and 30 pieces of side cuts, and to be packed with the same quality and quantity of salt as Mess Pork. The prime pieces shall be cut free of blade bone. The shoulder pieces are not to exceed 90 pounds in each barrel. When re-salted, the brine shall be drawn off and new brine added."

And as an aside...the 1911 edition of The Food Companion, there is also "Fat Back" which is defined as: "Often confused with salt pork (which comes from the sides and belly of a pig) fat back is the fresh layer (not salted or smoked) of fat that runs along the animal’s back. It is used to make lard and cracklings and used for cooking." In the same publication, Salt Pork is defined as being "So named because it is salt-cured, this is a layer of fat (usually with some streaks of lean) that is cut from the pig’s belly and sides. Salt pork is often confused with fat back, which is unsalted."

Please be very careful at the grocery store, there are some brands of slab and sliced bacon that is not salt or smoked cured, but is just "regular" bacon to which salt and artificial smoke flavoring has been added. Since it is neither salt nor smoked cured, it is NOT cured meat, and will spoil and poison one in short order.

"The westward migration owes much to salt pork. For pioneers, it was considered a staple in every larder. Homesteaders prized it above hard money. Salt pork begins as the fatty parts from the back, side, or belly of a hog. Fattier than bacon, it was cured by the dry-salt method but not smoked. Western cooks used it as a flavor and as a supplement to meat. Unlike meat, salt pork would keep awhile without spoiling. The flavor imparted to foods is unique to itself. At a time when spice racks were usually unavailable, salt pork served heroically with bland foods. [Soldiers] often carried salt pork. They fried it, sopping hardtack in the grease,

thereby softening what was an otherwise jawbreaking form of bread. Cowhands in line camps generally dredged slices of salt pork in flour and then fried it. The grease served as a substitute for butter. By modern taste standards, it sounds pretty dreadful. Old-timers were damn glad to get it. The alternative was to go hungry. Off in the wilderness, several days might pass before some form of game found its way into the cooking pot. Salt pork, bread, and coffee provided a welcome supper and sustenance for tomorrow's hardships." From Matt Braun, *Western Cooking*.

FIELD PREPARATION

Now, armed with history, what to do with this plump portion of porcine goodness?

- *Boiled Salt Pork*: "Soak salt pork for several hours. Dump water and refill with fresh water. Bring to a boil. After it has thoroughly cooked, remove the fat and enjoy the meat (what little there is of it.)"
- *Smith's Original Recipe* - (*The Compleat Housewife* - Eliza Smith, London, 1758; reprinted London, 1994) - "General Directions for Boiling" which mentions that: All salt meat must be put in when the water is cold; but fresh meat, not till it boils; and as many pounds as your piece weighs, so many quarters of an hour it will require in boiling."
- *Viele's Extra Crispy Recipe* (*Handbook for Active Service*) - Get your frying-pan very hot, put in some fat pork which will immediately melt, then put in the meat you wish to fry, (a small teaspoonful of salt and a quarter of a teaspoonful of pepper to every pound of meat.) When done, lay the meat on a dish, add a pint of water to the fat in the frying-pan, a few slices of onions, or 2 teaspoonsful of vinegar; thicken it with a little flour and pour it over the cooked meat. Any sauce, or a few chopped pickles, may be substituted for the vinegar or onions.
- *Western Brigade Salt Pork Fingers* - "Soak for several hours. Cut into small strips. Fry in grease or butter if available. Great when added with fried potatoes."
- *Kautz's Advice on Boiled Salt Pork. (Customs of Service)* – "Salt pork is usually boiled. As with salt beef, it should be well soaked to extract the salt, and then boiled for three or four hours. The grease, which should be skimmed off and saved, may be used in various ways as a substitute for lard: in the field, however, this cannot well be done. In permanent camps and garrison it can be saved, and, if not used, can be sold to advantage and will serve to increase the company fund. When issued to small messes, salt pork, like fresh beef, can be broiled on the coals; but this is a very wasteful method of preparing it."
- *Adamson's Salt Pork Suggestion* (*Grandmother in the Kitchen*) – "Soak salt pork (cut into slices for broiling or frying) in a one to two quarts milk and water; soak it over night if it is for breakfast, and for several hours before any other meal. The milk maybe either fresh or sour, and it is diluted with an equal quantity of water. Before cooking the slices, rinse them in water until it is clear. It will be found a very excellent method, and when once adopted will invariably be the choice of preparation."
- *Adamson's Salt Pork and Sour Apples.* (*Grandmother in the Kitchen*) – "This makes a very satisfying summer dinner when served with Boiled New Potatoes. Cut the slices of pork; lay them in cold water in the spider (a spider is a frying pan with legs on the bottom - ed.); boil them for 2 to 3 minutes; then pour off the water and set the spider again on the coals; now dredge the slices in cornmeal seasoned with pepper and brown them on both sides in the spider. In another spider, fry 1/2 inch slices of good tart cored but unpeeled apples in butter or drippings after dredging them in a little flour mixed with a pinch of cinnamon or ginger. Serve the pork and apples together."
- *Viele's Pork Soup for 25 men.* (*Handbook for Active Service*) - In 6 gallons of cold water put 12 pounds of pork, 3 quarts of beans, 2 pounds of rice, season to suit; let boil one hour and a half. Soak the beans over night.

- *Braun's Pork and Red-Eye Gravy.* (Matt Braun, Western Cooking) – “Fry pork in skillet. Remove pork but leave drippings. For each pound of pork, add 1/2 cup strong black coffee to pan drippings. Stir constantly and bring to boil. Serve over pork and crackers.”
- *Viele's Stewed Salt Pork or Beef for 25 men.* (Handbook for Active Service) – “ Wash the meat well, let it soak all night, wash out the salt as much as possible; 8 pounds of salt beef, 5pounds of salt pork, 1/3 of a pound of sugar, 2 pounds of sliced onions, 0 quarts of water, and a pound of rice; let it simmer gently for two or three hours.”
- *Viele's Salt Pork with Potatoes and Cabbage for 25 men.* (Handbook for Active Service) – “Take 15 pounds of pork, extract the bones, 3 pounds of potatoes, 2 winter cabbages, let it boil for two hours; 10 quarts of water. Serve the meat with vegetables round it. The gravy will make a good broth with peas, beans, or rice added, also a little onion. Ship biscuit broken into the broth makes a very nutritious soup.”

You will be surprised how good it tastes. Salt pork goes well with the assistance of a wedge of cabbage, or green apples, some dried apples, rice, corn meal, wheat flour, turnips, greens, onion, poke salad, wild onions, rutabaga, parsnips, salsify, green beans, dried beans, sauerkraut, potatoes, soaked hardtack, canned tomatoes, ground black pepper, curry powder, molasses, melado, ground hominy, powdered mustard, tumeric, water...use your imagination. Take your time preparing your meals, and remember the old campaigner adage: “**Burnt Food Sucks!**”

So, let's say you are at an event near the end of June along a woodline adjoining a field west of a small creek in Adams County, Pennsylvania, not far from a covered bridge, and someone has boiled the living heck out of a couple of kettles of salt pork. They are issuing pieces of hot salt pork (that you think is way too small) and they toss it still steaming in your haversack atop a collection of hard crackers. Let's hope your coffee and sugar didn't get in the bottom of that mess. Did it? Oh, well, but there is yet another life lesson learned.

What to do? Stare at it for a while. Note the pretty rainbow colors in the greasy water dripping from the sides. Long for a potato or two – these might be a good thing to bring along! In recent years, I have become a real fan of desiccated potatoes, and when provided with a meat ration, some great hash can be made whether you have beef, chicken, turkey, salt beef, ham, salt pork, mystery meat, or even certain fish. Harmony House (www.harmonyhousefoods.com) sells desiccated potatoes for a reasonable price, has great customer service, and dang near delivers even large quantities overnight.

Period variety heirloom rice can be purchased from Anson Mills:

<http://www.ansonmills.com/page22/page35/page35.html>

THE RATION DETAIL

It will behoove your sergeant charged with subsistence matters to have with his company level mess detail at least the minimum of:

- Two sheet iron (mild steel) mess kettles – One for meat, and one for coffee.
- Two mess pans (optional) – Serving hot meat.
- Three clean gum blankets, rubber side up – Fetching crackers and meat.
- Two empty, clean, haversacks or issue feed bags – Fetching coffee and sugar.
- One axe (sharp) or froe (dull) – Splitting wood.
- One hatchet (sharp enough to shave) – Hacking through bone.
- One side knife (very sharp) – To portion meat.
- One nice, clean, scoured, board approximately 12” x 18” – Cutting surface for meat.
- One skimmer (can make one from a can) – Collecting and reserving the grease.
- One empty can – Keeping the grease.
- Two empty wooden boxes – Ration storage for late arrivals.

- One sharp bayonet – Moving the meet around in the kettle.
- One pint ladle – Removing the meat.
- Two wool mess rags (thick) – Handling the kettles.
- Four huck/other period type towels – Two for coffee and sugar, and two for clean up.
- One match safe stocked with matches in good order – Fire starting.
- Soap – Clean up.
- Firestarter – We gave away enough USCC pamphlets at Winter 1864 to burn Chicago, so use some of them.
- One good headcount per company – Not just of warm bodies, but of those who actually paid for rations. Writing this on a ration request form would be most helpful.

HINTS FOR THE CULINARY CHALLENGED

- Fill your canteen prior to arrival.
- Clean and check the working order of your fork, spoon, and pocketknife.
- Sharpen that dull pocketknife.
- Clean your mess equipment. Dirty mess gear can and will test your ability to sprint.
- A wool mess rag (hand sized blanket scraps do nicely) can and will prevent burns.
- Wash that nasty huck towel.
- Provide yourself with a seasonal fresh vegetable or two.
- Put at least three poke bags or wrapping rags in the haversack.
- A chip of soap is most useful.
- Refill your tooth powder. Find your toothbrush.
- Bring something to trade with your neighbor.
- A small tin of salve (Vaseline or Bag Balm will do) will keep you in the game once the galding starts in your most tender twig-n-berries region.