

Breeding Ground

Pregnant women had warned me about the “nesting” impulse that hits in the final weeks, and by the beginning of my ninth month I could no longer deny its unmistakable pull. Recently freed from my cooking job at a fine-dining kitchen—where my belly had been the novelty among my fellow cooks—my husband and I had driven home, across the country, to our rustic cabin in the northern wilds of Minnesota. Once again installed in the tiny kitchen, I found that my hands hummed with an inchoate, fuss-budgety need to prepare. Truthfully, though, after eight years of working in professional kitchens I was more at home with filleting fish than I was painting whimsical stencils around the nursery.

My natural reaction to the impending birth of my son was to stockpile food. Freezing tomato sauce and pureed baked squash was a good start—but it didn’t feel substantial enough. A 300-pound hog, however, was a step in the right direction.

The pig kind of fell into our laps: Our neighbor, Rod, who grows oats for his pigs on our front 80-acre field, gave us a full-grown hog as payment for his summer rent. Getting the whole pig on the hoof thrilled my inner homesteader.

Visions of butchering-day delicacies made with piggy parts that I couldn’t buy in the store consumed me: Rillettes, a rich shredded pate, flush with creamy fatback. Crispy pig’s ear salad with a spicy Dijon vinaigrette. Poached and de-boned trotters, braised with lentils. A soft, meaty block of head cheese, packed with garlic and herbs.

That last dish epitomized the kind of charcuterie I was compelled to stash in my chest freezer. Thrifty and old-school-American and fancy all at once, head cheese felt to me like the perfect snackable provision to have on hand when the baby came. We’d spread it on toast swiped with hot mustard and eat it with one hand.

Drawing by Hank and Aaron Spangler.



Despite my butchering-day fantasy, I had to admit that slaughtering a full-grown sow wasn't a job for someone in my condition. My cousin Matt came to the rescue. A butcher by trade, he had agreed a few years back—half in jest—to kill and process the pig in exchange for an elaborate dinner prepared by me, and now I was taking him up on it.

As we looked over my lengthy wish list, he agreed to all of my special requests—the leaf lard, the fresh belly, the bone-in top loin roast—but balked at the ears and the feet: “You are *not* going to want to eat the feet. They smell like they’ve spent their lives marinating in pig shit—which they have.”

I shrugged.

“And you’re going to make head cheese—with the whole head?” He laughed, giving my balloon of a belly a sidelong glance.

We both remembered the head cheese that our Grandma Dion made for Christmas Eve supper. She cut it into neat cubes of translucent, beach-sand-colored gel and arranged them in two obedient lines on a flowered platter. Throughout the dinner, the cubes quaked whenever we awkward teenagers knocked our knees against the table. While we cousins all shuddered at their offer, my uncle smacked his lips and theatrically consumed cube after gelatinous cube. Grandma assured us the head cheese began with a respectable chunk of pork shoulder, fresh hocks and some Knox gelatin. I’m guessing she used the entire box of gelatin, for her head cheese didn’t merely ripple with giggles, it chortled.

I learned to eat this dish in my twenties after falling in love with haute cuisine. Suddenly head cheese morphed from a strange, old-fashioned meat jello into *tête en gelée* ... brawn in aspic ... souse . . . *formaggio di testa*. It sounded best in Italian. I will never forget my first testa, at Mario Batali’s Lupa: a slice of head heaven. Served at room temperature, it was an Italian mosaic sculpted from bits tugged from the pig’s most intimate, cranial spaces. As the addictive jelly slowly melted in my mouth, it left behind morsels of softly spiced meat, as tender as tuna.

I had high hopes for my own head cheese, and began to mentally shuffle through procedures and aromatics, shooting for something that would taste like the delicious offspring of Italian *testa* and Midwestern souse.

On butchering day we met my cousin in Rod’s farmyard. By the early morning light that rose between the sheds and shops, Matt lowered his shotgun to rest between the pig’s eyes. The overstuffed sow swooped to the ground. My cousin picked up a thin silver slicer, carefully detached the head from the neck, and set it in a clean bucket. Then he “skinned” the pig, as they say around here, freeing the hide from the fatback in one single heavy sheath. A quick slice up the belly set off an avalanche of innards. I saw the liver falling to the ground and, in a rare third-trimester moment of grace, leaped forward to catch it mid-air. The kidneys, heart, and spleen hung suspended by threads, but the intestines took the tumble. Gutted and skinned, the pig looked more recognizable to me than it did when alive. My cousin heaved the beast onto a clean bed of plastic in the back of his pickup, gingerly laid his gun alongside it, gave me a quick hug, and took off for the meat market to do the rest of the processing. In addition to the head, I walked away with two buckets of butchering-day tidbits: the feet and ears in one and the warm organs in the other.

The leaking head was a priority, so head cheese was first up. I thought for a second, then put in a call to the sous chef from my last restaurant job in Manhattan, who had made a *testa* in a basement kitchen. He whirled off a few steps and ingredients: “blanch and scrape the head, simmer it with a bouquet garni, garlic, some herbs...

you know the ride.” I repeated his words with the same note of ennui and hung up, thinking it would be easy.

It would have been easier had my largest stockpot been big enough. When the water around the head came to a boil, the snout poked above the pot lip and blew blood bubbles at me. That wasn’t going to work. Not only was the bloody nose putting an ugly face on the whole project, but I couldn’t contaminate cooked meat with raw meat. I grabbed the handles, slid a protective towel over my enormous belly, and jerked the pot outside. With two carving forks, I pierced the hot head on either side and lifted it out into a waiting roaster. My eyes lit on my husband’s Sawzall, lying nearby due to a recent building project, so I used it to buzz through the snout, the palate, and the tip of the tongue. Back in the pot, the hot water seethed over the sawed-off snout.

Once I’d skimmed the froth from the pot and added some whole spices and garlic, the whole thing began to look and smell like a lovely boiled dinner. Five hours later, the cheeks were tender when poked, the jaw wobbled, and the broth had concentrated enough to gel, which I could see, because the surface hung together in a single puddle. I drained off the thick stock, pushed the soft fat from the face to the side, and chopped up the pink cheeks and diced the tender tongue. But when it came time to add the translucent flesh of the slick, skinned snout, my hands hesitated. I threw in a few chubby chunks of meat to cover the loss and left the head cheese to set up in the refrigerator.

Then I turned my attention to the feet and the ears. Only once they were in their pots, pansy-pink and covered with bristly white hair, sending foggy plumes of pig-stall fumes toward the rafters, did I realize that I’d failed to take into account the super-nose of pregnancy. And it was too late. On entering the kitchen my husband turned sharply toward the stove where the feet and ears were simmering, took one look at my expression (the soft shock of the civilian rather than the stoic hard freeze of the professional), pivoted around me to stack the ear-blanching pot on top of the foot-blanching pot and took the stinking mess outside. A few moments later I heard it softly flop at the edge of the woods.

Half of my butchering-day projects were in those pots, but I didn’t protest. Never in my career as a cook had I been squeamish. For two years in a row I began each morning by ripping apart forty or so clawing lobsters, pulling the intestines from their clenching tails and shoving skewers up their anal cavities to keep the tail meat flat. I have dealt with my fair share of dead soft-shell crabs and rotten wild mushrooms, not to mention scraps of raw lamb, ingested to find out whether or not it was too old to serve. (It was.) And I have especially vivid memories of being trapped in a walk-in refrigerator with a tub of steaming tripe whose uniquely pastoral pestilence rapidly overtook all the good air.

But now I toddled across the pigsty-scented kitchen to my new glider and sat down heavily. I felt as bulbous and full of juice as a ripe melon. It suddenly occurred to me that assisting with the hog-killing and butchering, harvesting the organs, cooking down the head, and then making head cheese had been a day’s adventure enough. Some of the more savory parts of this butchering-day saga—grinding liver, rendering fatback—would just have to wait.

Ten days later, I laid my fragile newborn in his bassinet, and then went to the fridge, located the block of head cheese, and unwrapped it. The chunks of pink pork in golden gelatin were like fossils floating in amber, cut off from air. In other words, still good. I carved a thick slice and set it on hot toast rubbed with the fragrant cut face of a clove of garlic. The golden edges promptly melted, running into the honeycombed bread.

Funny how quickly the head cheese lost its hard-won, identifying, bounce—and how much better it tasted once it did.



Pork Rillettes
serves 12 or more as an appetizer

3 pounds pork butt or shoulder
1 pound fatback or fatty fresh belly
3 dried bay leaves
6 leaves fresh sage
2 sprigs rosemary
2 teaspoons black peppercorns
2 cloves
½-inch slice fresh ginger
1 Tablespoon salt

Cut the pork butt and fatback into 2-inch cubes. Place in a 3-quart saucepan and add water to cover. Bring the water to a boil and drain immediately, discarding the water. (This removes all impurities from the meat.) Place the meat back in the pot.

Combine the bay leaves, sage, rosemary, peppercorns, cloves and ginger in the center of a 6-inch square of cheesecloth and tie the ends tightly with kitchen string. Add the sachet to the meat, along with the salt.

Cover the pot and set it over very low heat. Cook gently for three hours, stirring periodically, until the meat feels very tender when tested with a fork and begins to fall apart when stirred. (If using a crockpot, cook on low for 8 hours, or until the meat begins to collapse.)

Drain the meat by pouring it out into a colander set over a large bowl; reserve all of the drained fat. Place the meat in a standing mixer fitted with a paddle attachment and paddle until shredded. (Alternately, smash meat with a potato masher until shredded.) Ladle out ⅓ cup clear fat, reserving it to top off the jars. Pour the remaining fat and juice into the meat, mixing to incorporate. Let the meat cool to room temperature before packing into clean glass jars. Top with a thin layer of the fat—it prevents the meat from oxidizing. Refrigerate and consume within 10 days. You might want to remove the clear fat layer before serving. Best eaten with a slight chill on hot toast or bread.

