

TRIBUTARIES

same. Goat stews are more prevalent in Limestone County, but they are not unknown in the other counties. One significant difference is that chicken stew cooks buy slaughtered and plucked chickens while Limestone County goat stew cooks like Carlos Shannon of Piney Chapel and Marvin Smith of Coxeystew cooks like Carlos Shannon of Piney Chapel and Marvin Smith of Coxeystew cooks like Carlos Shannon of Piney Chapel and Marvin Smith of Coxeystew slaughter and prepare the goats themselves. "From on-the-hoof to on-the-table," Carlos says, "it takes three days to make a good goat stew."

The recipe below is a composite of recipes collected during my research and includes accepted variations on the basic recipe. I'm assuming that most readers are not going to make fifty gallons of chicken stew for Sunday dinner, so I've adjusted this recipe for an average-sized family meal. Whatever quantity the reader plans to make, the important thing to remember is the formula, meat : potatoes : onions = 1 : 1/2 : 1/4. Amounts of other ingredients can be adjusted according to quantity of stew being made. (For larger quantities, simmer longer—much longer.)

Chicken or Goat Stew

- 1 large chicken, approximately 4 pounds, or 4 pounds of goat meat
- 2 pounds of potatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 pound of onions, peeled and diced
- 2 14.5-ounce cans of diced or crushed tomatoes with juice*
- 1 14.5-ounce can kernel corn**
- 3 tablespoons sugar
- 5 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon pepper***
- 1-2 tablespoons butter****

Place chicken—whole or cut in pieces—or chunks of goat in large stock pot and cover with water. Cook, adding water as needed to keep meat covered, until tender. Remove meat from pot and set aside to cool. Skim excess fat from broth. Add diced potatoes to broth and cook "until you can squish a chunk between your fingers." Meanwhile, de-bone and shred meat, discarding skin of chicken. Return meat to pot and add remaining ingredients. Cook over low heat for about an hour or a half. Stew is to be slowly simmered, *never* allowed to boil.

Stir frequently to prevent stew from sticking to the pot. Add water as needed to prevent stew from thickening too rapidly, but keep in mind that a very thick stew is the desired goal. Serve with crackers or corn bread, sliced dill pickles, and iced tea. Any leftover stew will keep well in your freezer.

Variations:

*If desired, the amount of canned tomatoes may be reduced and an equal amount of tomato sauce substituted. Some goat stew recipes omit tomatoes altogether.

**Cream style corn may be substituted for whole kernel corn, but if so, add cream corn in last 30 minutes of cooking and stir stew constantly after corn is added.

***For the adventurous, 1 teaspoon of cayenne pepper and/or a couple of generous dashes of Louisiana hot sauce may also be added. Even if not added while cooking, it is usual to have a bottle of hot sauce available on the table when the stew is served.

****Butter, usually added only if cayenne pepper or hot sauce has been included, reduces the chances of heartburn according to many of my informants.

Conclusions

The question arises: Why are these stews so popular in northwestern Alabama and not in other parts of the state? A part of the answer may be that for much of its history Alabama has been a rural, agricultural state. Most people did not travel far from the area in which they were born. Thus, local food traditions developed that did not spread to other areas. The state is now more urban and there have been greater population movements, but for the most part food traditions remain strongest close to their point of origin.

For whatever reason, the chicken and goat stew tradition of northwestern Alabama is one that will likely continue far into the future. The practice provides opportunities for local people to socialize, it is a winning strategy for fund-raisers, and the stew is just really, really good. ■