

What Happened to Squirrel Pot Pie?

 [foodandwine.com/squirrel-pot-pie-11775871](https://www.facebook.com/foodandwine)

<https://www.facebook.com/foodandwine>



Credit:

JeffKearney / Getty Images

If you were to flip open a 1975 edition of [The Joy of Cooking](#), you might be startled by an illustration that demonstrates how to skin a squirrel.

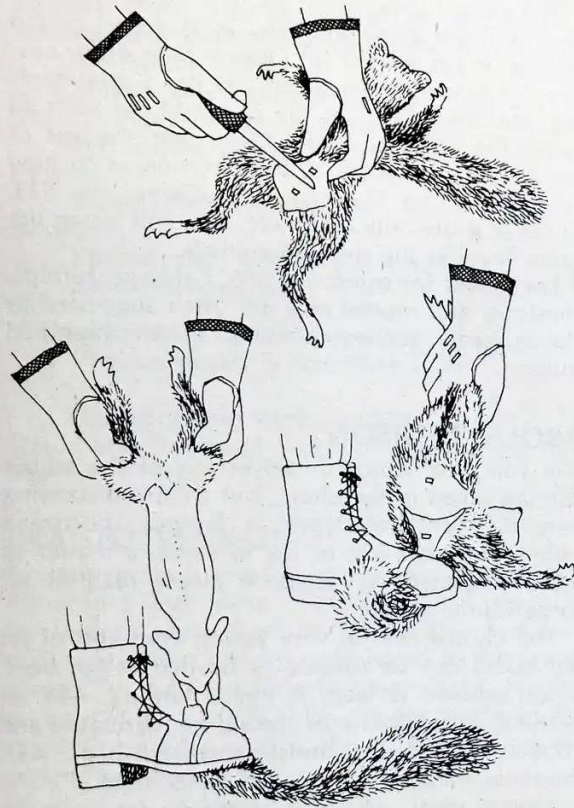
The page includes instructions on how to prepare a variety of small game, the kind mostly seen by the side of a busy road: opossum, porcupine, raccoon. Woodchuck, muskrat, armadillo, and beaver are on the following page.

A reader in 1975 was likely not so squeamish about the idea of eating squirrels. A reader in 1931, the year the first edition was published, might wonder what all the fuss is about.

Before farm-raised meat was abundant and cheap, when “[a chicken for every pot](#)” was aspirational, many people ate what they could find (also known as [foraging](#)). Often described as earthy, nutty, and rich, squirrel was considered a delicious source of protein, particularly in a classic [pot pie](#).

SQUIRREL

➤ Please read About Small Game, 513.
Gray squirrels are preferred to red squirrels, which are quite gamy in flavor.



➤ To skin, don gloves to avoid possible tularemia infection. Cut the tail bone through from beneath, but take care not to cut through the skin of the tail. Hold squirrel by the tail and then cut the skin the width of the back, as shown center. Turn the squirrel over on its back and step on the base of the tail. Hold the hind legs in one hand

Please read About Small Game, 513.

If possible, trap 'possum and feed it on milk and cereals for 10 days before killing. Clean, but do not skin. Treat as for pig by immersing the unskinned animal in water just below the boiling point. Test frequently by plucking at the hair. When it slips out readily, remove the opossum from the water and scrape. While scraping repeatedly, pour cool water over the surface of the animal. Remove small red glands in small of the back and under each foreleg between shoulder and ribs. Parblanch, 154, about 20 minutes each, in two or three changes of water, then roast as for pork, 477, or use recipes for rabbit. Serve with:

Turnip greens

PORCUPINE

➤ Please read About Small Game, 513. Skin by hanging back legs from hooks. Remove kernels in small of back and under forelegs. Hang in a cool dry place 48 hours. Soak overnight refrigerated in salted water:

1 porcupine

In the morning, bring this water to a boil. Drain and immerse porcupine again in cold water. Bring to a boil and again drain. Place the meat in a Dutch oven. Add:

3 cups water or light stock

1 rib celery, chopped

1 sliced medium-sized onion

¼ teaspoon pepper

1 teaspoon salt

Simmer until tender, about 2½ hours.

RACCOON

➤ Please read About Small Game, 513. Skin and remove glands in small of back and on either side of spine, and one under each foreleg of:

1 raccoon

Remove all fat, inside and out. Soak overnight refrigerated in:

Salt water

Blanch, 154, for 45 minutes. Add:

2 tablespoons baking soda

and continue to cook uncovered for 5 minutes.

The Joy of Cooking included instructions for skinning a squirrel in every edition until the seventh was released in 1997.

Courtesy of Christopher Michel / Joy of Cooking

What is squirrel pot pie?

When it comes to squirrel preparations, pot pie is second in popularity only to stews like Virginia's [Brunswick stew](#) and Kentucky's burgoo. A squirrel offers a few bites of meat per animal, and a pot pie is a smart way to stretch a small portion of protein using gravy and root vegetables.

This dish has a long history, according to Dr. KC Hysmith, a [food scholar and researcher based in North Carolina](#) and a consulting historian on the cookbook, [When Southern Women Cook: History, Lore, and Recipes](#).

“There are references [to squirrel pie] that date back to the medieval era in Europe, like one from [Le Ménagier de Paris](#) published in the late 14th century,” she says. That recipe called to gut and truss the squirrels, roast them, and then cook them in a pastry with a wild duck sauce or cameline sauce, a spiced medieval-era sauce.

“When the invasive North American gray squirrel was introduced in the late 1800s, there was an entirely new push to hunt and eat the newcomer so it wouldn’t deplete the native red squirrel.”

— Dr. KC Hysmith, food historian and scholar

“There are also numerous references to squirrel-eating in England,” says Hysmith. “For centuries, the red squirrel was hunted for its pelt. Presumably, the meat was eaten after. When the invasive North American gray squirrel was introduced in the late 1800s, there was an entirely new push to hunt and eat the newcomer so it wouldn’t deplete the native red squirrel.”

In the U.S., squirrel pot pie was featured in cookbooks like [Dixie Cookery](#) (1867, by Maria Massey Barringer) and [Louisiana Cookery](#) (1954, by Mary Land).

Squirrel pot pie was a staple of regional and Southern cookbooks throughout the 20th century, but “it is not exclusively Southern,” says Hysmith. “There are recipes for it in Buckeye cookbooks, too, as well as camping and frontier cookbooks.” The Women’s Club of Denton, Maryland, published a recipe submitted by Elizabeth Ecker in its 1983 recipe book, [The Chesapeake Collection](#). Gold Medal Flour even featured a squirrel pot pie recipe with a drop biscuit topping in its [1909 cookbook](#).

Of all the references to squirrel pot pie, Mary Land’s midcentury recipe, from *Louisiana Cookery*, may make tender-stomached readers uncomfortable. It calls for 10 squirrel heads, boiled until just tender. While startling today, the recipe seems sensible. If you’re going to trap and prepare squirrels, why waste anything edible?

Why did people stop cooking squirrel pot pie?

There are likely a couple reasons why (and how) eating squirrels fell out of favor. In his 1972 book, [American Cookery](#), James Beard wrote that the squirrel “has long been associated with elegant dining as well as with the simple food of the trapper and the nomad.” Toward the end of the 20th century, however, it was more associated with outdated, poor, subsistence eating.

By that time, the price of meat had been falling for years. Supermarkets were stocked with chicken, beef, and pork, all neatly shrink-wrapped. Hunting small game took more time and effort than picking up some chicken from the butcher.

As author Rebecca Rupp noted in a 2016 [National Geographic](#) article, hunting was increasingly done for sport. Many hunters turned to bigger game like wild turkey or deer, both of which offer much more meat for the effort.

In 1997, however, squirrel scurried off the American menu en masse. An [article in the medical journal *The Lancet*](#) linked eating squirrel brains with mad cow disease. Late-night TV hosts and syndicated columnists had a field day with the story. To eat squirrel suddenly seemed not just gauche, but dangerous.

When the seventh edition of *Joy of Cooking* was published in 1997, the squirrel-skinning illustrations were gone.

Is anyone still making squirrel pot pie?

It might not be a household staple, but plenty of people still enjoy squirrel — a widely available and sustainable source of protein — in pot pie and other dishes.

A [World Champion Squirrel Cookoff](#) has occurred annually since 2013 in Bentonville, Arkansas. The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has [featured squirrel meat several times](#) in its annual Food History Weekend. In 2016, Ailsa von Dobeneck cooked President James Garfield's squirrel soup, and two years later, Jason Flores made Buttermilk Fried Squirrel.

Stacy Lyn Harris, host of The Outdoor Channel's [The Sporting Chef](#), included a recipe for Southern Squirrel Pot Pie in [Stacy Lyn's Harvest Cookbook](#), published in 2017. Harris says her husband inspired her to create the dish.

"I have a hunting husband, and I don't mean a few times a year. It's in his DNA," she says. "I became determined to find ways to cook wild game, in this case squirrel, that not only tasted like a delicacy, but looked beautiful as well. I had made a wild turkey pot pie, and it turned out beautifully. So I thought, 'Why not use squirrel?'"

"To me, the most wonderful thing about eating squirrel and wild game is the continuity from the past to our present. It's as if our ancestors speak to us through time."

— Stacy Lyn Harris, cookbook author and host of *The Sporting Chef*

Harris's recipe adds fresh herbs and Guinness to the classic pot pie. "Because the squirrel's dark meat has an earthy, nutty flavor, [a dark] beer seemed to be a natural base," she says. "Rosemary, thyme, parsley, and garlic are staples when cooking rabbit or squirrel. All three have distinct, strong flavors that add to the earthiness of the dish."

“It is worth noting that most wild game is best when cooked with what they naturally eat,” she says. “I grow rosemary, parsley, and thyme in my garden. Squirrels are notoriously out there in the early morning eating these herbs.”

The dish sparked feelings of nostalgia in her husband. “I remember putting the pot pie on the table to my husband’s delight,” she says. “He was flooded with memories of his grandfather cooking it. I couldn’t believe it.”

It also turned out to be a real hit with the family, says Harris. “To me, the most wonderful thing about eating squirrel and wild game is the continuity from the past to our present. It’s as if our ancestors speak to us through time. We can put a new spin on old recipes, imagining how they would love the taste, or our take on their creations.”

In an age when [rabbit](#) and [quail](#) make regular appearances at fine-dining restaurants or high-end butcher shops, squirrel might deserve to resume its place at the dinner table.