

First catch your camel.....

Camel Meat Cuisine

Recipes

My reconstruction of the local method of cooking Camel a la Wedding would run:-

Take a large cooking pot of approximately 1000 litres capacity and support it on three large stones. Fill it three quarters full with water and start to boil by firing underneath with acacia logs. An alternative would be to heat it with one of the massive gas burners which can be bought in the souq.

Have a young male camel slaughtered and butchered into pieces to fit in the pot. Include the head, heart, liver, kidneys, hump fat and any other offal considered edible, such as lungs and stomach.

Add chopped onions and carrots by the kilogram and several packets of whole black pepper, cinnamon stick, cardamom, cumin and turmeric. Use a garden shovel to stir the pot. As the meat completes cooking add several packets of salt. Remove the meat and offal pieces when they are cooked and keep to one side. Add a 50 Kg bag of rice to the pot and cook in the stock.

To serve, pile the rice on a large platter, heap the meat on top and garnish with fried almonds, small roasted quail, hard boiled eggs and dried fruits.

I have only eaten camel twice to date, once at a party in the desert organised by the Municipality for the Nations in Bloom contestants and catered by the Intercon. The meat had been roughly carved into chunks, was very tender and had a flavour similar to beef. One of the characteristics of the meat which I noticed was a high proportion of connective tissue between the muscle fibres which had been broken down to a soft gelatine consistency by the cooking. James MacDonald of the Intercon told me afterwards that the Intercon always called in specialist caterers to cook camel as it was a specialised business. At weddings the host would often have served the meat directly from the carcass, the underloin just inside the rib cage being considered the choice cut to be offered to special guests.

My own attempts at cooking camel steaks purchased at the Ajman Continent have only been moderately successful. The steaks were sliced quite thin so I opted to braise them with red wine and onions in gravy. After a gentle simmer for 40 minutes the thicker pieces of steak were still a little tough, probably due to the connective tissue not being fully broken down.

Where to get the camel meat, try Carrefour (ex Continent) and it is usually available in the Al Ain covered souq at the butchers shops, look out for the young camel carcass strung up for sale.

I would suggest that long cooking methods such as pot roast or sofrito would be best for camel meat. My understanding is that camel was always boiled locally, the camels physique and poorly distributed fat content are not suitable for roasting whole and this method would also be very wasteful in terms of scarce heating resources. Mark Beech reports that he was offered baby camel hump fat that had been boiled at a wedding celebration in Ras al Khaimah. Despite experience with relatively fatty east european dishes, he found the offering inedible, it was a soft gelatinous mass of fat. Roasting the baby camel hump is therefore probably a good option.

The summer wedding season sees a lot of young male camels going in to the pot, it is the main use for the male camels these days now that they are no longer used for transport. A fully grown male camel will weigh about 450 Kg.

In the UAE when there was an abundance of camel meat available it was dried. Called **shareeh**, literally layers, the meat was cut into thin strips and air dried in the sun. It would keep for a long time and could be eaten without further preparation or used in cooked dishes. It is reported to be delicious, I have not seen it anywhere.

TECHNICALITIES

On a more technical note camel meat is a good source of protein, containing 27% on average. It is not as good a source of energy. One camel would provide one persons protein supply for 35 days but only 5 days of energy. A camel carcass is typically 66% muscle, 19% bone and 14% fat, most of which is in the hump. There is less fat in the meat and more moisture compared to beef, the muscle typically containing 1-2% fat, a healthy alternative to other red meats. The low fat content does however mean that roasting and grilling are probably unsuitable cooking techniques unless you baste frequently with another fat source.