

Boar's Head, Roast Pig, Goose, Turkey

Court of Last Resort on Rich Viands Lays Down the Law on Yuletide Feasts

They still sing, "Caput apri defero, Reddens laudes Domino,"¹ and march in with pipes and fiddles and the smoking boar's head in English universities and at some hifalutin Yuletide festivals this side the water; but turkey is our meat for everything but July 4th, and rarely do we drag in the noble Christmas goose, or startle the multitude with a pathetically lifelike little suckling pig.

We asked Milton Joseph, president of Washington Market, and court of last resort on questions of rich viands, if he could provide the head of a Black Forest tusker in case we should go desperately medieval; but he is a pragmatist, from long experience with epicures and with an epicurean smile he said there were no wild boars in the market, but he should do better by selecting the head of an aldermanic, heavy-jowled, jolly old Falstaffian porker of the Chester or Berkshire, or Poland-China breed and preparing it for stuffing with a forcemeat of pork tenderloins and Wiltshire ham and fine herbs and spices. He spoke of the lusciousness of wild boar roasts and chops with evident emotion, but reminded us that the fierce beast has, like Cassius, a lean and hungry look and may not grace the holly-garlanded platter of Christmas with that benevolent good cheer which glorifies the expansive countenance of the American pig, even when it is roasted.

There's no denying that some delectable tidbits lurk about the frame of the little suckling pig, stuffed with rice and ham, and trussed to stand upright with an apple in its mouth, but no furtive pangs should mar the benign influence of the great feast, and always our mind keeps tormenting us. The slaughter of the innocents! That small and playful-looking pig, it seems, should have died hereafter. The merrily melancholy Charles Lamb himself could not have devoured it without a tremulous sigh of remorse. On the other hand, the severed head of the mature swine appears to nestle comfortably on the trencher amid rich garnishments of greens and bright fruit and berries. He have lived a full life, we are persuaded, after the manner of his thrifty and optimistic race, and passed to his reward in the porcine Elysian fields of eternal corn and clover.

An ideal setting for such a stately dish in the entertainment of good company would include braces of pheasants on the flanks, a roasted wild goose, a pair of canvasbacks, and some quail and partridge as outriders. Then the timid souls that would sooner admire a boar's head than eat it may be sustained and soothed, and before they're done a single venturesome taste may bring conversion.

In those gracious days of happy memory before the world war there were certain well furnished buffets about the town where reposed, in winter, cold pig's head embellished with aspic; and they never were truly ornamental because one never arrived in time to find them intact in all their symmetry and elegance, and only by sheer luck did one get the choicest morsels, yet there was luck in finding anything but bones. Cold in aspic, or smoking hot and shining with golden-brown glaze, the pig's head is delicious, and the English have a good trick of serving a puree of peas with it as a sauce. Commonly it is well cleaned, salted, boiled, and baked with all the skull and bones intact, but in Washington Market they can bone it for you with the artistry of culinary surgery, and then you may stuff it full of ham and tenderloins and herbs, and carve it with the greatest of ease, like a galantine of turkey or of pheasant.

Turn away for an hour from the glittering bazaars of Fifth Avenue in these days and meet the spirit of Christmas in the markets. The good things of the earth are there, of field and farm, orchard and garden, and it seems that not all the diamonds, gold, trinkets, gewgaws and bibelots of the gift shops can bring such rosy, bright-eyed gladness to faces young or old as do the great shows of nature's bounty. The magic of Christmas is eternal and eternally a mystery, and magically it brings now, as always, a light to hard and cynical eyes, a glow to pale and furrowed cheeks, a fellowship where fellowship is strained, and the gleam and glow and warmth seem brighter and more genial among the simplest and most natural things, "so hallow'd and so gracious is the time."²

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Caput apri defero

1. The Boar's Head Carol, 1521

2. Hamlet, Act I, Scene I, Line 164