Bone Gatherer

Sometimes the most delectable part of the animal isn't the meat

BY MEI CHIN

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED MEAT on the bone—spicy, messy chicken wings; panfried pork chops; the beef ribs my mom used to bake, coated in bread crumbs and mustard butter—but I never really thought about bones until a recent trip to South America forced me to take them seriously. I had signed on as a camp cook for a birding expedition to a remote part of Central Suriname. We were helicoptered onto a patch of bare rock several thousand feet above sea level, a place where, we were told, no human had been before. We were surrounded by jungle filled, not only with birds, but venomous snakes. I was assured by my companions that any resident jaguars would mistake me for a small mammal and, hence, lunch. Torrential rains flooded camp every night, and our waterlogged satellite phone died, leaving us with no contact to the outside world.

It was a feral life. I hacked through bamboo with a machete, washed my hair in a stream. I cooked with peanut butter, rice, and from time to time, the roasted carcasses of the birds that we had collected. I had learned the weird but beautiful art of preparing specimens, a painstaking process in which you separate the bird's skin from its flesh while leaving much of the skeleton intact. We had set up bird-checking nets a bit higher on the mountain, and I would check these while my mates were out exploring. The rocks above camp were slippery with moss and rain. I have been clumsy since I was a child, but in the mountains, I got very good at falling—indeed, I became kind of addicted to it.

It wasn't until a couple of weeks after my return to the States, when I took a spectacular spill on some hotel stairs, that my falls on the mountain came back to me with a vengence. I found myself in excruciating pain, with a broken hip, and doctors were telling me that my left femur—the leg bone between the pelvis and knee—was so messed up, it would have to be replaced. I'd be off my feet for months. According to the older Chinese women in my life, I was supposed to eat a lot of bones, in keeping with the traditional Far Eastern belief that you should eat whatever body part is ailing—owl eyes for myopia, pig lungs for emphysema. Condemned as I was to crutches and virtual house arrest, the old beliefs started to make sense.

Besides, despite my own fragility, bones are powerful things. In ancient China, they were used to make prophecies. In the Gabriel García Márquez novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* a girl carries her parents' bones around in a sack, where they clank and groan until a spot is located for their burial. In my favorite fairy tale, the bone of a murdered man is carved into a flute, which plays a song that reveals the killer. There is a restlessness in bones, a personality that endures long after the owner has passed on.

I began my convalescence by making a stock from beef necks and veal knuckles the color of old lace. When I saw them—beautiful, haunting—I was reminded of the animals from which they came. When you look at a steak you don't necessarily think of a steer, but the neck bones, shaped like giant jacks, conjured the massiveness of the animal and how it moved.

Nothing demonstrates the elemental magic of bones more aptly than a stock. Any Chinese child with the flu will know the taste of pork bone and ginger stock, hot, heady, and healing. Korean babies are weaned on *sullongtang,* the milk-white soup made from beef bones simmered for anywhere from 12 hours to days on end. The French chef Auguste Escoffier claimed that a great kitchen is founded on great stock; serious cooks approach their stocks with shamanic intensity. It's a matter of extrac-

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tion. Protein, sugar, and fat break down during cooking and are released from the meat and bones into the water in which they steep. And while the meat contributes to flavor, the bones, loaded with collagen, impart body and a velvety mouth-feel.

Home from the hospital, staring at the stove in my apartment's small kitchen, revisiting old volumes on my shelves—the fairy-tale collections and cookbooks and photo albums—I began to entertain a romantic notion of the perfect broth, based on the memory of a *brodo* I had when I was 11 years old on a chilly March evening in Venice. Limpid, sweet, and nuanced, it was as fortifying as wine or tea—a rich yet balanced infusion of meat, bone, and aromatics. Broth has always been part of my cooking repertoire, but I've frequently allowed mine to boil because I could not be bothered to watch the pot. If there's one thing all the cookbooks I now pored over agreed on, it's that should your broth ever so much as begin to boil, you should throw it away. During boiling, particles of fat and protein are agitated and become suspended in the liquid; a boiled broth is murky and greasy.

In pajamas and slightly stoned from daytime television and Percocet, I had plenty of time on my hands—time enough, finally, to heed the experts. I set my stove to its lowest heat and prepared to wait a very long time: By all accounts, the water—and beef bones and turkey wings, carrots, onion, garlic, celery, and bay leaf—would take more than an hour just to come up to temperature. I left the pot on the stove overnight and all the next day. A *brodo* should barely simmer; several seconds should pass between bubbles. At a very low and constant heat, unwanted impurities released from the meat and bones will coagulate and rise to the top or cling to the sides of the pot, and they can be easily skimmed off.

When at last I strained the broth, the result was pure alchemy: a clear, golden liquid with a perfume much greater than the sum of its parts—there were notes of caramel and nutmeg, butter and clove. It was one of the most thrilling moments I've experienced as a cook. How often do we manage to duplicate perfectly a romantic notion? I garnished my first bowl with curls of Parmesan and sipped it slowly, inhaling the sweet steam.

Of course, these days it's trendy to be into bones, not only wings and ribs, but

***Mare e monte*, an Italian take on surf and turf: marrow, scallops, celery root, and black truffles nestled in a halved bone (see page 32 for a recipe).**

TODD COLEMAN

chicken necks and ham hocks and shanks. Much as many chefs can now be found flaunting their affinity for bones, they're still a fantastic bargain: At my local butcher, marrow bones go for $2.99 a pound. This is true of all sorts of bones and bony cuts. Sometimes, if a customer orders a noisette—the meaty eye of the rack of lamb—my butcher will even give me the bony remainder for free.

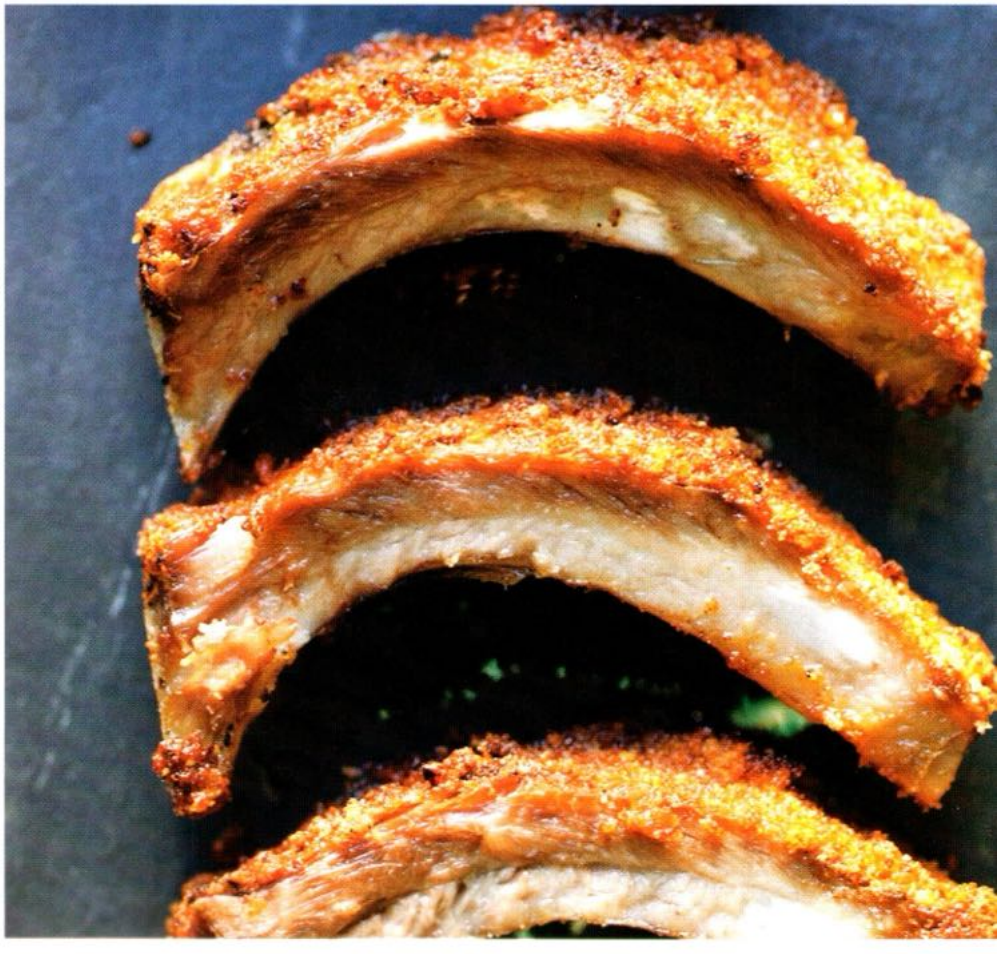
Years ago, the same butcher had taught me how to french a rack of lamb, a technique that involves scraping some of the meat away with a long, thin knife to lay bare a fringe of elegantly curved bones. Now, laid up and armed with a boning knife, I found the taxidermy skills I'd acquired in Suriname useful. I started frenching everything in sight, and was alarmingly good at it. I turned chicken wings into chicken lollipops and frenched itty-bitty rabbit racks. I found out that the technique also worked wonderfully with shank—the length of bone and meat just below the knee—by far my favorite part of any animal.

Lamb shanks braised low and slow, until the meat is tender and the bones release

The marrow was silk on my tongue, and yet the white bone on the plate retained an echo of the visceral and the wild

their marrow to enrich the braising liquid, are always marvelous served with something starchy to soak up the sauce—polenta, mashed potatoes, risotto—but I like them best when they're set, gigantic and resplendent, on a bed of white bean purée. Frenching the shanks makes the presentation that much more spectacular, a hunk of meat beckoning at the end of a length of parchment-colored bone. When I tried it, I browned the shanks thoroughly before putting them in the oven, and I made sure to turn the meat every half hour or so for an evenly caramelized exterior. Cooking a shank in this way is virtually foolproof due to its high ratio of bone to meat; because the bone absorbs heat, the meat immediately surrounding it cooks slowly and is the most succulent. And let us again not forget the collagen that attaches the meat to the bone. Over the course of cooking it turns to gelatin—a special treat to enjoy once you've dispensed with the meat.

Then there's marrow. When the creamy, voluptuous stuff is scooped from the bone's hollow, it can be stirred into a sauce to add



lushness. It is the best part of an osso buco—that's Italian for "bone with a hole"—and once you've stripped the meat from the long-braised veal shank and devoured it, inside that bone you'll find a final treat, a secret store, best coaxed out with a long, slender spoon.

To eat marrow—the tissue that produces new blood—is to indulge in an act that treads the boundary between the rude and the refined. There was, in fact, a time not too long ago when my supermarket was selling marrow only as a dog treat. But once I felt well enough to put on a dress and hail a cab, marrow was the first thing I sought. Together with my new hip—a man-made bone fashioned from enameled metal—I headed to a Manhattan restaurant called Ai Fiori.

If eating marrow is typically a messy, primal, hands-on affair, at Ai Fiori, chef Michael White has resolved the issue by halving the bone lengthwise. For the dish he calls *Mare e Monte* ("sea and mountain" in Italian, a play on surf and turf), White lines the halved bone with celery root purée, nestles in overlapping disks of steamed scallop and black truffle, lays out a layer of marrow on top, and then broils the whole thing. It was silk on my tongue, marrow I could eat with a knife and fork, a subtle balance of flavors and textures—and yet the white bone on the plate retained an echo of the visceral and the wild. It conjured what lurked in the shadows on that mountaintop where I fell so many times, and it evoked my mending body ensconced in that gleaming haute dining room, my crutch still at my side.

With bones, in other words, the possibilities for reincarnation are endless. A joint becomes a stock, which then becomes the base for *pot au feu,* or another rich, meaty stew. I've even taken to roasting cuts from animals on racks made from their bones, a roast beef on a bed of marrow bones. It's culinary id. At some point, though, my fridge started to look like a boneyard, my hair smelled like veal, and I began to long for another life, one away from the stove and skipping on both legs. Still, I am grateful for the chance that being hobbled for a while presented me: to linger in the kitchen while things cooked slowly; then to grip the bones in my fist, use my teeth to strip the meat, and quietly relish the savagery—and the delicacy—of it all.

Clockwise, from top left: tortellini in *brodo,* a classic Italian broth; chicken lollipops; braised lamb shanks; deviled baby back ribs. (See page 32 for recipes.)

TODD COLEMAN (4)

Braised Lamb Shanks

SERVES 6

Chef Tom Valenti of Manhattan's Ouest uses the foreshank, a meatier cut than the hindshank, for this recipe for shanks (pictured on page 31) braised in a stock flavored with wine, aromatics, and anchovies.

- 6 lamb foreshanks, trimmed
  Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- ¾ cup olive oil
- 2 ribs celery, roughly chopped
- 1 large carrot, roughly chopped
- 1 large yellow onion, roughly chopped
- ½ cup tomato paste
- 1 tbsp. whole black peppercorns
- 5 sprigs thyme
- 3 anchovy filets
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 head garlic, halved crosswise
- 2 cups red wine
- 1 cup white wine
- ⅓ cup white wine vinegar
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 4 cups veal or chicken stock

1 Make the lamb shanks: Heat oven to 325°. Using a paring knife, cut each shank to the bone 1" from the narrow end to help expose the bone while cooking; season generously with salt and pepper, and set aside. Heat ¼ cup oil in a 6-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Add celery, carrot, and onion, and cook, stirring, until very soft, about 10 minutes. Add tomato paste, and cook, stirring, until lightly caramelized, about 2 minutes. Add peppercorns, thyme, anchovies, bay leaf, and garlic, and cook, stirring, for 3 minutes more. Add both wines, vinegar, and sugar, and bring to a boil; reduce heat to medium-low, add stock, and keep stock mixture warm.

2 Heat remaining oil in a 12" skillet over medium-high heat. Working in batches, add lamb shanks, and cook, turning as needed, until browned on all sides, about 4 minutes. Transfer shanks to a large roasting pan, and pour stock mixture over and around shanks. Cover with foil, and bake in oven for 1 hour. Remove foil, and continue cooking, turning shanks every half hour, until tender and caramelized, about 3 hours.

3 Remove shanks from braising liquid and pour liquid through a fine strainer into a bowl; skim any fat on the surface. Serve lamb shanks with liquid as a sauce.

Brodo

(Beef Broth with Tortellini and Parmesan)

SERVES 6–8

This classic Italian broth (pictured on page 30), is adapted from a recipe in Lynne Rossetto Kasper's *The Splendid Table* (William Morrow Cookbooks, 1992).

- 4 lb. turkey wings, cut into 3" pieces
- 2 lb. beef shank bones, trimmed
- 2 ribs celery, roughly chopped
- 2 large carrots, roughly chopped
- 2 large yellow onions, unpeeled, roots trimmed, roughly chopped
- 2 sprigs parsley
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 clove garlic, unpeeled, crushed
- 1 lb. cheese-filled tortellini pasta
  Parmesan, for serving

1 Place turkey wings and beef bones in a 12-qt. saucepan and cover with cold water by 4"; place pan over medium heat and let mixture come to a very slow simmer, skimming off any foam or impurities that rise to the surface in the meantime. Add celery, carrots, onions, parsley, bay leaf, and garlic, and return to a slow simmer; cook, occasionally skimming fat and any impurities from the surface, for 6 hours. Add 5 cups boiling water, and continue cooking, adding more boiling water as necessary to keep solids submerged, for 6 hours more.

2 Remove from heat, pour through a fine strainer into a large container, and discard solids. Let broth cool to room temperature, and then refrigerate until chilled. Once chilled, remove hardened layer of fat from surface of broth, and discard.

3 To serve, reheat broth in a 4-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring broth to a boil, and then add pasta; cook, stirring, until al dente, about 7 minutes. Ladle pasta and broth into serving bowls, and top with freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

Chicken Lollipops

SERVES 6–8

These spicy, soy-marinated chicken wings (pictured on page 31) get their elegant "lollipop" shape from a technique called frenching. (See "Frenching 101," on page 82, for step-by-step instructions on frenching the chicken wings.)

- 2 tbsp. soy sauce
- 12 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 2 serrano chiles, stemmed and sliced
- 1 2" piece ginger, peeled and roughly chopped
- ½ cup flour
- ¼ cup cornstarch
- 1 tbsp. paprika
- ¼ tsp. red food coloring (optional)
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
  Kosher salt, to taste
- 2 lb. chicken wing drummettes, meat pulled to one end, opposite end trimmed
  Canola oil, for frying
  Coriander chutney, to serve

1 Combine soy sauce, garlic, chiles, ginger, and 2 tbsp. water in a food processor, and process until smooth. Transfer to a large bowl and stir in flour, cornstarch, paprika, food coloring (if you like), egg, and salt; add chicken lollipops, and toss to coat evenly with the marinade. Cover with plastic wrap and let sit at room temperature for 1 hour, or refrigerate for 4 hours.

2 Pour oil to a depth of 2" in a 6-qt. Dutch oven, and heat over medium-high heat until a deep-fry thermometer reads 350°. Working in batches, fry chicken lollipops until golden brown and cooked through, about 7 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer to paper towels to drain briefly before serving. Serve with chutney for dipping.

Deviled Baby Back Ribs

SERVES 4–6

A crunchy, mustard-laced bread crumb coating makes a particularly delectable contrast to the sweet and tender meat on pork baby backs (pictured on page 30).

- 2 racks (3 lb.) pork baby back ribs
  Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 3 tbsp. heavy cream
- 3 tbsp. cayenne pepper
- 2 tbsp. Dijon mustard
- ½ cup dried bread crumbs
- 3 tbsp. unsalted butter, melted

1 Heat oven to 375°. Season ribs generously with salt and pepper, place in a shallow roasting pan, and bake until tender, about 40 minutes. Let cool.

2 Meanwhile, stir together cream, cayenne, and mustard in a small bowl; spread evenly over ribs. Sprinkle ribs with bread crumbs, and then drizzle with butter.

3 Heat broiler to high. Broil ribs until topping is browned and crusty, about 4 minutes. Flip ribs, and broil until browned on the bottom, about 3 minutes. Cut ribs into individual bones to serve.

Mare e Monte

(Scallops and Truffles with Beef Marrow)

SERVES 8

In this elegant take on surf and turf (pictured on page 28), served as an appetizer at Ai Fiori in New York City, chef Michael White nestles sweet scallops, black truffles, and celery root purée into split marrow bones (see page 84) and broils them under a blanket of bone marrow.

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tbsp. sherry vinegar
- 2 tbsp. balsamic vinegar
- 2 tbsp. finely chopped black truffles, plus 2 oz. thinly sliced
  Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1½ lb. celery root, peeled and roughly chopped
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 8 split beef marrow bones (see page 84)
- ½ cup distilled white vinegar
- 6 diver scallops
  Chicory or other peppery lettuce, to serve
  Celery leaves and fleur de sel, to garnish

1 To make the vinaigrette, whisk together oil, sherry and balsamic vinegars, finely chopped truffles, and salt and pepper; set aside.

2 To make the celery purée, bring celery root, stock, and cream to a boil in a 4-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat, and cook, stirring, until very tender, about 35 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer celery root to a food processor, and purée with ¼ cup cooking liquid; transfer to a bowl, season with salt and pepper, and set aside.

3 Using a paring knife, remove raw marrow from bones, and slice thinly; reserve. Bring distilled vinegar and 10 cups water to a boil in a 6-qt. saucepan over high heat, and add bones; cook until bones are bright white, about 45 minutes. Drain and let cool. Meanwhile, bring 1" of water to a boil in a 4-qt. saucepan with a steamer basket insert; add scallops and cook until cooked through, about 5 minutes. Remove scallops and let cool; cut into ¼"-thick slices, and set aside.

4 To serve, heat broiler to high. Place bones, cavity side up, on a rimmed baking sheet, and fill each with ¼ cup celery root purée. Alternately lay scallop and black truffle slices on top of purée; drizzle with some of the vinaigrette. Lay slices of bone marrow lengthwise over scallops and truffles, and then broil until marrow is just melted, about 1 minute. Transfer to serving plates with a bed of lettuce underneath, and garnish with celery leaves and fleur de sel; drizzle more vinaigrette over marrow.