

Entry for They Eat That? A Cultural Encyclopedia of Weird Food

Camel

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A camel is an herbivore, or plant-eating mammal used for transport, meat and milk around the world. A camel has a long neck and legs, a hump or humps in the center of the back, and is covered all over in coarse hair. They can reach up to eleven feet tall and as much as 1500 pounds.

There are two main species of camels, dromedaries (Arabians) and bactrians. Dromedaries have one hump and are native to the Middle East and northern Africa, while bactrians have two humps and are native to the central and western parts of Asia. The hump is made up of fat and body tissue, not bone, and is considered a delicacy in many Middle Eastern countries.

A camel's natural habitat is the desert, as it can go for many days without food or water in the heat, and still maintain and produce quality milk. However, the ancestors of camels originated in the prairies of North America, and it is suspected many moved to Africa and Asia during the Ice Age, where they were later domesticated. Today, camel meat and milk is consumed in the Middle East, northern Africa, central and western Asia, and parts of the Australian Outback.

Camels produce a red meat that tastes similar to beef, but with a slightly sweeter aftertaste. Around 50% of the camel's body weight makes up its meat, and much of the meat is tough, which is why it is often ground up into sausages, burgers or kebabs. Camel meat is rich in minerals and has a lower fat content than beef, which helps reduce the risk of developing heart disease. Research even shows that camel meat contains antioxidants that help fight cancer.

Camel milk is a light white color, and tastes slightly salty due to the animal's varied diet. The milk can be drunk fresh, fermented into yogurt, sour cream or cheese, or turned into butter. It can remain unrefrigerated and unpreserved for up to 6 months. Cultured camel milk products have lowered lactose and are more digestible for those that are lactose-intolerant. Camel milk is nutritional because it has low saturated, easily digestible fats and high amounts of amino acids, proteins and minerals. The milk also has particles thought to be made of insulin, so it is often recommended for diabetics.

Camel eating is traditional to Muslim areas of the Middle & Near East, and northern Africa. Tradition says that the prophet Muhammad declared people who did not eat camel meat to be un-Muslim, so Muslims in these areas try to eat camel meat at least once a year. One ancient camel recipe is like a precursor to the popular American dish, the turkducken; it involves a baby camel stuffed with a lamb stuffed with a chicken, and the cavities are filled with rice, spices, raisins and nuts. For special occasions, often a whole baby camel is purchased, cut-up and roasted for a special meal, especially the stomach,

hocks and hump. Another special occasion meal is lubia bishmi, which is a stew of camel, green beans and tomatoes served with rice pilaf and yogurt.

There are also more modern and easier ways to consume camel in these areas. Camel meat is not available in grocery stores or restaurants, but rather at specialty butchers, who will sometimes signify they sell camel meat by hanging a small sign with a camel on it or a real severed camel head outside their shop. If asked, the specialty camel butchers will take a piece of fresh camel meat, mince it, grill it and serve it as a kebab or kefta right in the shop.

Even though camel is rarely served at restaurants, a restaurant in Dubai called The Local House has started offering camel hamburgers as a healthy alternative to the traditional cow-based burger. The camel burgers are fat and cholesterol-free, require a special process to tenderize the meat, and are covered in cheese and burger sauce.

Around 150 years ago, English settlers brought dromedary camels to Australia to help travel, haul and explore, and a few got loose. Today, the largest pack of wild dromedaries lives in the Australian Outback, which is a giant desert. Estimates suggest there to be anywhere from 200,000-one million of these wild camels, and they are considered a nuisance on native species and plants, so Australia is encouraging it's people to eat more camel meat. Traditionally, camel meat was only consumed by Aboriginal Australians in the Outback, but it is starting to become trendier. Occasionally, camel meat pies (which mimic the famous English/Australian meat pies) can be found at popular snack shops around the Outback, and a few companies are trying to sell gourmet camel steaks and sausages around the country. Much of the camel meat produce in Australia, however, is exported to other countries.

Serving: Camel Kefta Burgers (inspired by a recipe found at Anissa Helou's Blog,

<http://www.anissas.com/blog1/?p=76>)

1 medium yellow onion, chopped
1 large clove of garlic, minced
½ cup flat leaf parsley, finely chopped
1 pound ground camel meat
½ teaspoon Chinese Five Spice powder
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
Salt and pepper to taste

Mix all of the ingredients together in a bowl until thoroughly blended, then make a small patty and fry it off to taste for seasonings. Divide the meat into ten equal portions, then roll into balls and slightly flatten.

Heat up a pan or charcoal grill, then cook the meat on each side, two to three minutes or until it is done to your desired temperature. Serve hot with pita bread and yogurt.

Suggested Reading:

Heine, Peter. Food Culture in the Near East, Middle East and North Africa. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Katz, Solomn H. Encyclopedia of Food and Culture. Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002.

Bulliet, Richard W. The Camel and The Wheel. Columbia University Press, 1990.

Helou, Anissa. "Camel Hump, Finally" *Anissa Helou's Blog*,
<http://www.anissas.com/blog1/?p=1301>, accessed April 19, 2010.