

“Snake-Bitten Chicken”

By Russ Case

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I'll take fried chicken over Snake-Bitten Chicken any day. Why ruin it with venom? In yesterday's blog I broached the subject of turtle eating in Asia. Today, let's look at another bizarre -- to Westerners, anyway -- Asian dining practice that involves a reptile.

The dish I alluded to at the end of yesterday's blog is the one from which the title of this blog is taken, Snake-Bitten Chicken. A number of restaurants in the southern province of Guangdong and the southwestern city of Chongqing have been serving this dish, the main ingredient of which is a chicken that has been bitten to death by a venomous snake.

Like I said yesterday, who thinks of these things? I suppose one way they come about is because the eating of dishes such as this, according to their advocates, can result in beneficial effects to the body. For instance, one report I found stated that for those who want to eat it, Snake-Bitten Chicken will alleviate rheumatism. I wonder if virility plays a role in it, too. It seems that whenever I hear of weird Asian dining practices, such as the eating of powdered rhinoceros horn or ground tiger penis, virility is the ultimate goal of the gourmand. This appears to be a very sought-after benefit when one is perusing restaurant menus in certain areas of Asia.

As for Snake-Bitten Chicken, controversy raged after a video was posted on the Internet showing a Chinese cook holding a snake and forcing it to bite a live chicken. Reptile fans may at least be glad to know that the snake is not killed and eaten, at least not that has been reported. Maybe it is well taken care of and pampered so it can be used to envenomate other chickens to satisfy restaurant patrons clamoring for Snake-Bitten Chicken.

For the record, I have seen the video and definitely found it off-putting. I couldn't tell what kind of snake it was. Someone wondered if it was a Chinese cobra (*Naja atra*), but I don't think so. I felt sorry for the chicken. So did a lot of other people, and angry protesters began posting comments online. After that, the news reports really began popping up like mushrooms. As reported by Agence France-Presse, a staff member at the Shunde Renjia Restaurant in the Guangdong city of Foshan complained about the controversy, saying that the restaurant has been serving Snake-Bitten Chicken for years and it is a favorite dish among customers. "It is our most successful dish," she said. She didn't say anything about rheumatism, but the article states that she said when heated the snake toxin is turned into an enzyme that "can help keep the human body warm and clear blood vessels."

More recently, Chinese health authorities in Guangdong have instructed the restaurants to stop offering Snake-Bitten Chicken, and the establishments in Chongqing are being told likewise. I don't know if this means the dish will be banned forever or not. Like I said in yesterday's blog, getting people to change long-time traditional eating habits can be tough, especially if the foods being eaten are purported to offer some kind of cure or aid to body function.

Would ordering this dish be similar to what happens at a seafood restaurant, where you go in and pick your lobster? Do patrons at these establishments pick their chickens and snakes? You may wonder, understandably, whether anyone who has supped upon Snake-Bitten Chicken has gotten sick, and if so, were they served antivenom for dessert? I couldn't find any reports of diners suffering ill effects from the dish. China Daily quoted an unnamed doctor as saying the meat is safe to eat because the venom is cooked out of it at high temperatures. I also read that stomach acids may nullify venom. Still, eating this dish seems unnecessarily risky. What if the chicken is served undercooked? Does the hapless diner get a double whammy of both *Salmonella* and envenomation, despite the aforementioned stomach acid theory?

I have some achy joints and eczema that flares up occasionally – maybe I should grill up some black widow spiders. On second thought, I think I'll stick with ibuprofen and skin moisturizers.

If you are interested in dishes that involve reptile ingredients check out the 2005 book *The Culinary Herpetologist*, by Ernest Liner and published by Bibliomania. It's a collection of reptile recipes, including Onion Fried Frog Legs, Iguana Molé, Poached Alligator Tail and more than 900 others. There is also a short section in the back featuring indigenous people's herp-based foods, such as roasted poison dart frog.

I have never prepared a meal from this book, but in closing, I will state for the record that I love alligator meat. Whenever I'm in New Orleans I go to Ralph and Kacoo's for their "Swamp Bites" -- blackened alligator -- with a side of hush puppies. Alligator fans, please don't hate me.

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