

Rendering Lard from Pork Fat: a visual journey

by Lucia de Moranza

There is plenty of evidence and mention of using animal fats (often referred to as Grees, Grece, whyte Grece, or Fat) (S. Pegge) for cooking and candles, soap making and plenty of other uses. It was, however, a common enough practice that there is no mention in specifically how they rendered out animal fat into a more useable form. This rendering step is necessary to remove the impurities that remain after the butchering, bits of connective tissue are not much help in candles or soap, nor are scraps of meat.

I am using pork fat, as it was left over from sausage making, to render into lard. It's been in the freezer since the January sausage making fest, and about half of it was thawed before going in the pot, and half was not. As I have not found any period explanations on how it was done, I've turned to modern sources as my guide. It appears that there are four main methods, which at their core are but a single method. Chop up the fat into small pieces (or grind), melt and strain. The differences come in that some add water to start to help keep the fat from burning before it starts to melt, and some melt it in the oven rather than on the stovetop. Many prefer to use a crockpot to help ensure the slow and gentle heat that is required, rather than on the stovetop. I decided that a cast iron dutch oven was a reasonable approximation of a heavy pot that could be used in period, and that my stovetop wasn't so far off working over coals. It is highly unlikely that they would have worked over an active fire, that temperature isn't very steady, and when one is boiling fat, the idea of flames jumping up to catch it on fire just seems like a horribly bad idea.

I began by chopping up the fat into smaller pieces. You'll note that we weren't very careful in getting a lot of the meat out, so there's a fair bit of meat left in amongst the fat. In hind sight, I probably should have trimmed this better, but it does make for very tasty cracklings.



Figure 1 Chopping up pork fat

I decided to go with water at the bottom of the pan, just to ensure a nice even cooking, especially as some of my fat was still partially frozen. I'm using an enameled cast iron dutch oven here, with approx a cup of water in the bottom and then all the pork bits tossed into it. The stove is set to about medium low, as I am hoping for a nice slow melt.



Figure 2 Pork fat and water at start

Then the waiting game begins. The chunks get stirred about every 10 - 15 minutes as the water boils off and the fat starts to melt away from the meat. This is what it looks like about half an hour into things.



Figure 3 30 minutes into cook time

Even in just another fifteen minutes, there's quite a bit more crackling and popping and the liquid has risen over the chunks with bubbling that's certainly not water. The house smells quite strongly of pork, but it's not an unpleasant smell (if you like pork well enough.)



Figure 4 45 mins into cook time

At almost exactly the hour mark, I decided to strain off the fat. Most sites recommended cheesecloth or a coffee filter. I was out of cheesecloth, shockingly so, but coffee filters are eternal and fit my mesh strainer perfectly.



Finally, the liquid gold! Strained into a mason jar, and once cooled, soon to live in the fridge. Home rendered lard is not hydrogenated, and therefore can go rancid if not kept cool (or frozen), unlike commercial lard.



Figure 5 Finished!

As an added bonus after the lard was strained off, there was a nice collection of cracklings left behind. They're quite tasty, much like unsalted bacon.



Figure 6 Cracklings

This was fairly quick, rather painless and easy and something I will absolutely do again when next we make sausage and have a fair chunk of fat left over. I might well see about trying it with beef fat next time.

References:

Grit Magazine, ed. *Lard*. Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2012.

How to Render Lard: <http://www.homesicktexan.com/2008/05/how-to-render-lard.html>

How to Render Lard: <http://www.thenourishinggourmet.com/2009/04/how-to-render-lard.html>

The Forme of Cury by Samuel Pegge, approx 1390
www.pbm.com/~lindahl/foc/FoC079small.html