

*What's a cook to do when sailing through piranha-infested waters?*

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# MAKING DO WITH MUSKRAT MARINADE

by Mary Heckrotte

The Macareo River in Venezuela is about as remote as a sailboat can go. It may not be the end of the earth, but it sure seems like one of God's jumping off points. We were anchored there, way up in the jungle in a little channel, with Ann and Eric on our buddy boat *Temerarius* and Al and Hattie on *Blossom*, when along came a canoe full of Warao Indians bearing gifts.

In the bottom of their canoe, six caimans (which the fellows insisted on calling "alligators") had already made their last stand. We oohed and aahed and took lots of pictures, and then threw together a couple of bacon-and-eggs-and-potatoes kind of casseroles and invited the guys to come aboard for potluck breakfast. Then, with grins like mules eating briars, we accepted a gift of several pounds of nice white "alligator" meat.

Now what? Do you suppose that a single one of the cookbooks any of us



*Carl Heckrotte holding a "man-eating" piranha which is soon to be eaten by the Heckrottes.*

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had on board had recipes for caiman — or alligator or even crocodile? Not even close. But Ann found a recipe for muskrat, and Hattie reasoned there

couldn't be too much difference between a muskrat and an alligator — both seem pretty wild and exotic. So she mixed up a batch of Muskrat Marinade and poured it over a couple of pounds of meat to marinate until the next day. With a mischievous look in her eye, Ann declared she would make "alligator bites" using a standard fish fingers coating. Adding a few dishes of this and that from the provisions we had on board, we gathered the next evening on *Blossom* for a mighty fine dining experience, at least potluck four stars!

The next morning, inspired by tales of man-eating piranhas lurking in the still waters, Eric, Al and my husband Carl went fishing. In no time at all, they were back with eight purple and green iridescent fish with the wickedest-looking teeth you'd ever want to steer clear of. They say the best defense is a good offense . . . so we ate them. Filleted, battered, and deep fried, piranha are tender, white, and

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## COOKING ABOARD

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mild-tasting, though you do have to watch out for tiny little bones.

We went on upriver and met Warao Indians from villages along the river's edge. They live in open-sided, thatched-roof houses built on stilts over the water, just like in the pictures I saw in my geography books 40-something years ago, and just like they did for hundreds of generations before Columbus found his way to their world. Most have never been upriver to Tucapita, the nearest town, a full eight hours away even with an outboard engine. They've never seen cars nor buildings. Many speak only their native Warao language, although others have learned Spanish from traders. They paddled out to our boats in primitive, dugout canoes to trade their beads and baskets for our t-shirts, cloth and fish hooks.

We spent several days anchored in front of the village where the "alligator" hunters live. We visited daily in their houses and they came out to our boats



*A small "caño" off the beautiful Macareo River.*

— all of us gawking at the way other folks live, laughing and learning about the differences and similarities. One fellow announced late in the afternoon that he planned to have dinner that evening on *Temerarius*. Though uninvited and unexpected, he was certainly most welcome — at least until he showed up with his six kids and three

more men! Coming only partly unglued, Ann picked the chicken she had prepared off the bones, chopped it up so it would stretch further, and added more rice and a can of tomatoes to the pot.

On another evening, 18 Warao men, women and children, all freshly-bathed and wearing the very best clothes they owned, showed up at *Camryka*, quite obviously expecting dinner. Good old rice! This time two packs of kielbasa sausage did the stretching and four cans of applesauce from the bottom of the bottom locker made a perfectly adequate side dish. The kids

chugged down a whole gallon of orange drink mix and granola bars were a big hit for dessert.

Sometimes you've just got to make do with what you have — like that saying about life giving you lemons, so you make lemonade. Those times get to be a way of life for cruisers, coming more and less often depending on the remoteness of the anchorages. The point, after all, usually isn't the food but the adventure and the fellowship.

### Muskrat Marinade

For each pound of muskrat (or alligator!) use:

- 2 T lemon juice
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1/8 tsp. pepper

Mix all together and pour over meat. Refrigerate and marinate for at least 3 hours or overnight. Grill or bake meat.



*Warao Indian homes along the Macareo River, Venezuela.*

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Carl & Mary Heckrotte with Tashi, a miniature schnauzer and chief security officer, are in their sixth year of cruising, first on a Westerly 36' called *Mariah*, and now on a Pan Oceanic 46', *Camryka*. Their home port is Jordan Creek, North Carolina.