Kangaroo

This not a recipe for most Australians as some species of kangaroo are protected by law. For the Pitjantjatjara and indeed for many other desert peoples, the cookbook instructions read something like this:

Take a recently hunted kangaroo. Gut the animal within an hour or two of death, laying it on its back with its hind legs splayed out. Dislocate the legs at the thigh and push them outwards, revealing the stomach clear of the legs. Place bushes on one side of the carcass and make a short incision in the lower stomach. Pull the intestines out onto the bushes. Detach the lower intestine approximately fifty centimetres from the rectum and expel pellets. Open the stomach and empty and clean the tripe. Discard all but the lower intestine.

Sharpen a short peeled stick at both ends. Leaving the stomach outside the carcass and lying on the leaves insert the stick into the sides of the stomach incision to form a suture, which stitches the cut together. Wrap the piece of lower intestine four or five times around the stick, in a figure of eight, to tie up the stick and stomach incision. The end is then impaled on one end of the sharpened stick. There is a traditional prohibition that forbids the washing of the blood of the red kangaroo from hands or implements.

Ground oven cooking must be done in sand or at least sandy soil. Dig a small pit approximately one and a half metres long and forty centimetres deep. Heap a large quantity of dry wood into the pit to a height of about one metre. When the fire is burning well, place the carcass, with stomach detached, on top of the conflagration and, using the tail or legs, turn it over several times until all the fur is singed off. Place the carcass to one side until the fire has burnt down to a hot bed of ashes. Cut off the tail.

Bury the carcass in the ashes with legs uppermost and shovel hot sand on its stomach. Lay the tail alongside it. Pile sand and then ashes over it so the rear legs and front paws protrude a little from the pit. Cook for approximately one hour.

The tail is traditionally the best meat and can also be skinned and boiled up in a camp oven with a few vegetables. The cartilage is sticky

An elderly man taught me how to tie up a kangaroo in order to carry it back to the camp. This technique predated the use of vehicles. Carrying a kangaroo on your head must have been a challenging task since a typical animal can weigh up to 50 kilos.

All directions are given in relation to the dead animal lying on its back, head uppermost, with the person by the kangaroo's tail. The kangaroo must first be gutted and sutured, as described above, and a portion of the gut retained for tying up.

Take the hind-leg on the left and tie it to the tail, using the intestine which has been rubbed in sand. Take the left forearm and bring back between the rear leg and tail. The right forearm is brought outside of the right leg so that the leg is pushed forward towards the head and held close to the body. Tie the right forearm to the left leg and knot along with the left forearm against the tail.

The tied-up kangaroo is lifted by its tail and forearms, with the head hanging down to the side and balanced on the hunter's head. If the stomach suture breaks, the blood spills out and this is regarded as a disgrace. Tying the kangaroo up the wrong way was regarded as a punishable offence. If a man carried a kangaroo the wrong way, for example, across the shoulders, he was subject to ridicule. People might say, for example, that he thought he was carrying a rabbit.

Yalata, South Australia, 1981
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to the touch and the meat rather elusive but the overall taste is excellent. The tail cooked in the ashes, as described above, is a more challenging proposition.

Pull the whole carcass out of the pit and beat off surplus ash with leafy branches. Butcher the carcass with an axe, dividing the head, back, ribs, forelegs, hind-legs and tail. The liver, heart, kidneys and other internal organs are also removed, although they may be taken out earlier and cooked in the ashes of a separate fire if preferred. The lungs are cooked inside with the ribs and can be eaten or they can be given to the dogs.

Once, in the Kimberley region, I spent several days visiting Aboriginal communities with a lawyer from Perth. (Not the same one as sat on the chair.) He was not altogether comfortable in the bush while I had the advantage of knowing my way around a bit.

On a cattle station, owned and run by an Aboriginal community, we were invited to have tea with an old white fellow who had lived in the bush most of his life. Just what he was doing living on that particular station, I can't recall, but he was one of the most hospitable men I can remember.

His home was a converted tin shed and his oven an old wood stove. Being a cattle station, there was no shortage of beef. He did us a roast.

He delicately cut the joint into one centimetre slabs and piled four or five onto each plate. Then followed a heap of potato and pumpkin with some gravy. The meat alone was enough to feed a small platoon for several days.

My legal colleague, whose usual cuisine was obviously both more delicate and moderate than that which was set before him (I suspect he was a closet vegetarian) blanched at the pile of food and the wedges of dark red meat. Fearing to offend he valiantly attempted to eat what was set before him. He failed quite spectacularly.

It's interesting how those who live in the bush and whose heart and mind occupy the vast open spaces and remote, unsophisticated dwelling places have a way of getting equal with lawyers and city folk.

I ate all of mine and remembered sitting on the ground while the lawyer sat on the chair.