

BUYING AND COOKING TERRAPIN

By Mrs. D. B. Fitzgerald

LIVING on the eastern shore of Maryland where terrapin abound I am in a position to let house-keepers into a secret which will enable them to enjoy this table luxury at a very moderate cost. Ask a dealer to give you the price of terrapin and he will quote counts at sixty dollars, scanty-backs at forty dollars and half-backs at thirty dollars per dozen. It is, perhaps, necessary to explain that the words "count," "scanty-back" and "half-back" are terms descriptive of three different sizes of terrapin. A count is a terrapin about seven inches in length, measured along the middle of the lower shell. A scanty-back is one about six and one-quarter inches in length, and three scanty-backs are rated as equal to two counts. A half-back is about five and three-quarter inches long, and two half-backs are equivalent to one count. Size is the only factor which enters into the price of terrapin. In respect to quality all terrapin are precisely the same, except that the larger ones sometimes contain eggs, which are never found in very small ones. This, however, is a matter which presents no difficulties to the expert cook, for the yolk of a hard-boiled hen's egg in a terrapin stew cannot be distinguished from the genuine article. The yolk of one egg can be transformed into four terrapin eggs which will deceive the very elect. Now even if you are rich enough to pay the extraordinary price asked for large terrapin I advise you to prefer scanty-backs and half-backs to counts, for the reason that you get much more for your money. You will pay the same price for twelve counts, eighteen scanty-backs and twenty-four half-backs, but in the kitchen and the dining-room you will find that eighteen scanty-backs or twenty-four half-backs contain a great deal more meat than a dozen counts. If you have even slight reasons for economy always buy the smaller sizes in preference to the larger.

BUT suppose you are not able to pay thirty dollars for a dozen terrapin. In this case let me tell you a secret which is known to few people except those who are fortunate enough to live close to the shores of the Chesapeake Bay. Terrapin less than five or five and one-quarter inches in length have no fictitious market value. They are sold, as beef and chickens are sold, for just about what they are actually worth. City dealers do not quote these terrapin to their customers, and do not generally handle them because the low price makes the margin of profits small, but a special order given to your dealer will get you as many as you want, from a dozen up to a barrel. In quality they are just as good as counts, and they sell from one dollar and eighty cents to two dollars a dozen. How much meat will a dozen such terrapin yield? More than you think. Last week I visited some large terrapin pens on the Synepuxent Bay. While there I purchased fifteen terrapin, most of them quite five inches long, for two dollars. Nine of these terrapin were served at supper the next evening to a party of six—four guests, my husband and myself—and the quantity was very satisfactory. Of course, it was not, in Maryland parlance, a "terrappin supper," where very little is served except terrapin; but the whole fifteen terrapin would have been amply sufficient to furnish the materials for a "terrappin supper" in the strictest sense of the term.

At a dinner where terrapin is served, one five-inch terrapin to each person is an estimate amply sufficient, and such terrapin ought to cost fifteen or twenty cents apiece, and if properly prepared the appreciation that will certainly be manifested by family or guests will more than compensate you for the slight additional inroad upon the expense account.

It is important to get the terrapin, but it is even more important to know how to serve them just right. The following receipt has been repeatedly tried and pronounced a "symphony in terrapin." The directions are for the cooking of one count, or, what is about equivalent, six five-inch terrapin. Drop the live terrapin into a pot of boiling water, cover closely and cook until tender. This sounds cruel but it is really the quickest way of killing them, and the only way to preserve the juices of the terrapin. When thoroughly cooked take off the shell, and (being careful to preserve the juices) remove the head, gall and sandbags, nothing else. All that remains is good. Be particular not to remove the bones. Pick the meat to pieces, put it in an earthenware dish and set it to cool. Fifteen minutes before dinner put the meat in a porcelain dish and set it on the stove to stew in its own juice; at the end of five minutes add two tablespoonfuls of melted butter, two tablespoonfuls of rich cream, a little pepper and salt, and set back to stew for seven or eight minutes longer. When ready to serve pour in a gill of sherry or Madeira. During the process of cooking keep the dish or pan tightly covered. If these directions are followed you will have a dish fit for an epicure.