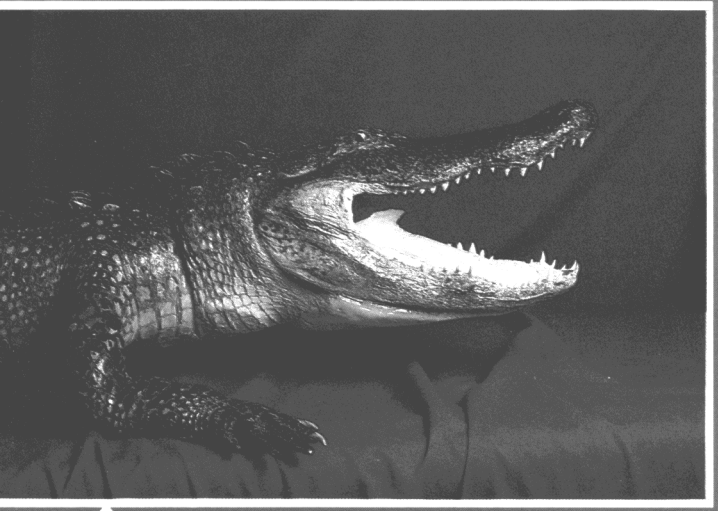
Louisiana Gator—



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Louisiana State University
Agricultural Center
Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service

LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE & FORESTRY

Louisiana Gators

The French explorers called them "les cocodries"; the Spanish, "los lagartos." But today American alligators, thriving in the bayous and marshes of Louisiana, are respectfully referred to as gators.

Forty years ago, alligators were considered an endangered species. Their numbers were declining in Louisiana and the other southeastern states which comprise their natural range. Through sound wildlife management and conservation efforts, the alligator population is steadily growing.

Gator Conservation

Louisiana has been and still is the leader when it comes to research and management of these wild reptiles. Louisiana biologists have studied the habitat requirements, food habits and reproductive traits of gators to formulate the state's alligator management program.

Census techniques have been developed to track population trends. In the backwater swamps and lakes of central and north Louisiana, head counts are made by night. A gator's eyes will reflect firey red in a beam of light on a dark night. The space between the eyes gives a clue to the size of the animal.

In the coastal marshes where 90 percent of the gators live, aerial surveys from helicopters are made in early July to count the newly constructed nests. Biologists use the number of nests as an index to the total population of gators.

Because of the detail and wealth of data collected, Louisiana gators are among the most intensively managed wild species on the face of the earth.

A Valuable Natural Resource

So how can the aesthetic value of a gator sliding into the bayou with barely a ripple justify such an intensive management program? It can't. But if you can view this scaley reptile as a renewable natural resource, all of this can and does make sense, dollars and sense.

Ironically, it has been the valuable leather trade and, more recently, the meat market, which have enabled the success of the gator conservation effort.

Fees paid by gator hunters and gator farmers provide the funding for the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to manage this resource. License fees and hide tag fees amount to more than a half million dollars for the conservation and management of Louisiana gators.

The wild harvest of gators occurs in September after the nesting season. The annual harvest quota is around 25,000 and is composed mostly of males and non-reproductive females.

Since the re-establishment of the statewide harvest program in 1979, the average size of the harvested gators remains about seven feet long although a few 13 footers are occasionally caught.

Hunters can catch only a certain number of gators based on the allocation of tags assigned to specific landholdings. The serially numbered tags are immediately attached and remain on the gator hide until tanned into leather. The tag, along with special skinning procedures, prevents illegally harvested skins from entering the market.

Gator Farming

Farm-raised gators are harvested throughout the year, depending on their size and market demand. The well-cared-for gators are between three and five feet in length during their second year of growth. Farm-raised gators more than double their natural growth rate because of a constant warm environment and a balanced diet. Farmers stock their farms by gathering eggs from nests in the wild and artificially incubating them. As the previous year's crop of hatchlings reach market size, the farmer

must release a certain percentage of the gators back into the wild where the eggs were originally collected. In this way, the wild stocks are compensated with as many gators as would have naturally survived.

The farmer, in turn, benefits from all the gators which would have been lost because of natural mortality. Again, all of this is closely supervised by the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and is part of the total gator conservation program.

Gator Leather Products

The quality and prestige that alligator leather commands is recognized around the world. Ninety percent of the gators harvested in Louisiana will ultimately be purchased as quality leather goods in the Far East or Europe. Less than 10 percent will find their way back to U.S. markets. Because of this, the fashion centers of New York and Dallas show promise for further growth of domestic markets.

Products courtesy of Richard Shaffett, Louisiana Tannery, Inc., Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Cooking with Gator

Louisiana gator shows signs of becoming another of the state's contributions to the Cajun cooking craze that's sweeping the nation. Gator, once considered a novelty item, is found on many restaurant menus as both entree and appetizer selections. The mild flavor and a texture similar to chicken or pork allow gator meat to be substituted in both traditional and original recipes.

Gator is an excellent choice for health-conscious consumers because it is high in protein and very low in calories, fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. In this way, it is comparable to fish and seafood.

Gator fits well into current dietary guidelines which recommend decreasing fat, saturated fat and cholesterol to reduce risk of heart disease, obesity, diabetes and certain types of cancer. Alligator is also a good source of omega-3 fatty acids which protect against heart disease.

Nutritional analysis of Louisiana alligator recently performed by Louisiana State University Agricultural Center Experiment Station researchers showed the following information for 100 grams (about 3-1/2 ounces) uncooked alligator:

Calories	100
Protein	22 g
Fat	1.5 g
Saturated	0.5 g
Monounsaturated	0.4 g
Polyunsaturated	0.6 g
Cholesterol	45 mg

Gator meat is available from either wild or farm-raised sources. Large quantities of meat are processed during the September harvest season and frozen for later use. The quality of frozen meat is maintained for up to 12 months. Fresh, farm-raised gator meat is available throughout the year.

Tips for Using Alligator Meat

1. Use tail and jaw cuts for baked, fried and grilled items. Tenderize body and leg meat, and use in soups, gumbos, picantes, casseroles, etc.

2. Use mechanical tenderization methods for less tender cuts.

3. Cut across the grain for increased tenderness.

4. Remove all fat and sinew before preparation or freezing. Since the fat is not marbled through the meat, it is easy to remove.

5. Freeze alligator for up to one year. Remove fat and wrap in moisture-vapor-proof material.

Gator is Available in Stores

Recent legislation has removed the special license requirements for restaurants and grocery stores to sell gator meat. To ensure product quality, gators must be skinned and processed according to the standards set forth by the Louisiana Departments of Health and Agriculture. For a list of licensed gator meat suppliers, contact the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries.

Culinary Creations

Besides the standard preparation methods such as fried alligator or alligator sauce picante', Louisiana chefs have created many award-winning selections.

Alligator Courtableu by James Graham, Le Chef de Cocodrie, Prejean's Restaurant, Lafayette, features medallions of thinly sliced strips of alligator rolled around a mixture of crawfish, tasso and Monterey Jack cheese served with garlic-red pepper sauce.

Chef Enola Prudhomme of Prudhomme's Cajun Cafe in Carencro has developed a delectable **Alligator Stir-fry** and **Alligator Pasta**. Both of these selections are low in fat.

Chef John Folse, Lafitte's Landing, Donaldsonville, features numerous alligator specialities on his menu. According to Chef Folse, "Alligator has found its way out of the black iron pots of camp cooking and into the copper saute pans of fine dining restaurants. Alligator meat offers the professional chef or home cook more versatility and uniqueness than any other comparable meat."

Alligator Stir-fry

Chef Enola Prudhomme
Prudhomme's Cajun Cafe, Carencro, La.

1 pound alligator, cut into 1/4 inch strips
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon ground white pepper
1/2 teaspoon ground red pepper
1/2 teaspoon chili powder
3 teaspoons low-sodium soy sauce
1 tablespoon low-sodium Worcestershire sauce
3 teaspoons cornstarch
2 cups beef stock or water
1 small zucchini, cut into julienne strips
1 small squash, cut into julienne strips
1/2 thinly sliced medium onion
1 cup fresh broccoli florets
1 cup fresh cauliflowerets
4 thinly sliced red bell pepper rings

Spray the inside of a large skillet with nonstick vegetable cooking spray and place over high heat. Add the meat and saute, stirring for 5 minutes. Add the next seven ingredients; cook for 10 minutes, stirring often. Dissolve the cornstarch in stock and add to the skillet along with all the remaining ingredients, stirring well. Cook for 10 minutes, or until sauce thickens, stirring occasionally. Serves 4.

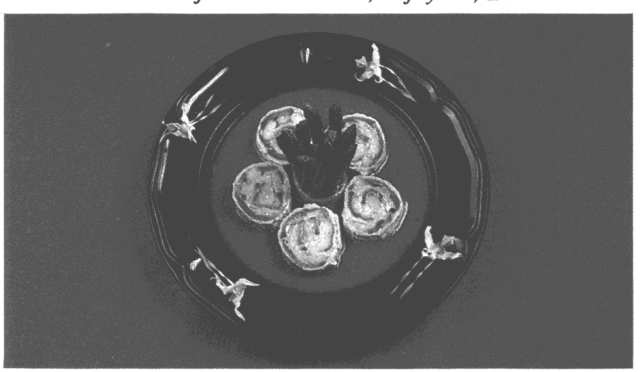
Nutrition Information for Alligator Stir-fry:

Calories	153	Percentage of calories from fat: 12 percent
Protein	27 g	
Fat	2 g	
Saturated	.6g	
Monounsaturated	.5 g	
Polyunsaturated	.9 g	
Cholesterol	51 mg	
Sodium	461 mg	Exchanges: 4 lean meat exchanges

Alligator Soup by Chef James Graham

Alligator Courtableu

James Graham, Le Chef de Cocodrie
Prejean's Restaurant, Lafayette, La.



2, 6-ounce alligator fillets
3 ounces turkey tasso
1 ounce shredded Monterey Jack cheese
1 ounce shredded mild Cheddar cheese
3 ounces small (50-60 count) poached shrimp
1/8 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon sugar
1/8 teaspoon red pepper
1/8 teaspoon black pepper
1/8 teaspoon garlic powder
1 beaten egg
1 tablespoon milk
1 tablespoon flour

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Pound alligator fillets to 1/4 inch thick without tearing. Combine salt, sugar, red pepper, black pepper and garlic powder. Set aside. Prepare egg wash by beating 1 egg with 1 tablespoon milk. Set aside.

Lay out pounded alligator fillets. Spread remaining ingredients and seasoning mix over the center of the fillets, leaving a 3/4 inch border around the edge.

Pour egg wash onto the 3/4 inch border. Sprinkle with flour. Roll tightly, jelly-roll style. Secure ends with toothpicks. Place rolls in a casserole dish generously sprayed with vegetable cooking spray. Spray rolls lightly with vegetable cooking spray. Bake 20 minutes in preheated 400 degree oven.

Garlic-Red Pepper Sauce:

8 ounce bottle clam juice
1/2 teaspoon red pepper
1/4 cup finely diced onion
1 teaspoon freshly minced garlic
1 tablespoon cornstarch
1 tablespoon margarine
1/4 cup evaporated skim milk

To prepare sauce: Combine clam juice, red pepper and onion in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil. Mix cornstarch with 1/8 cup cold water and add to mixture. Cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat. Fold in margarine and evaporated milk. Cool.

Remove alligator from oven and cool for 20 minutes before slicing. Remove toothpicks. Slice in 3/4 inch thick medallions.

Pour sauce into bottom of serving platter. Arrange medallions on platter, either side by side, or slightly overlapped. Serves 4.

Nutrition Information (without sauce):

Calories	229	Percentage of calories from fat: 28 percent
Protein	35 g	
Fat	7 g	
Saturated	4 g	
Monounsaturated	2.3 g	
Polyunsaturated	1.1 g	
Cholesterol	163 mg	Percentage of calories from fat (with sauce): 31 percent
Sodium	366 mg	Exchanges: 4 lean meat exchanges

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— Chef John Folse, Lafitte's Landing
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Funds for printing this publication were provided by the **Louisiana Dept. of Agriculture and Forestry,** Bob Odom, Commissioner, in cooperation with the Louisiana Alligator Farmers and Ranchers Association.

Pub.No. 2507 **(20M) 10/92**

Louisiana State University Agricultural Center
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Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service
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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture. Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service follows a nondiscriminatory policy in programs and employment.