

RATTLESNAKES MAKE GOOD EATING

By ROY A. BENJAMIN, JR.

AN AMERICAN farmer has packed up his troubles in small tin cans and sells them at fancy prices to gourmets throughout the country. George Kenneth End's troubles were rattlesnakes — the only things that prospered on his scrub-strewn acres near Arcadia, Florida, while vegetable crops and a small pork-canning plant failed End miserably. One day he had an idea.

"Boys," he said to his two sons, "I've always wondered what a rattler would taste like. Let's see." A plump and deadly five-footer was decapitated, and Mrs. End's pots and pans were introduced to a delicacy it had not before been their fate to meet. This pioneer experiment in cooking "rattlesteak" was mostly a matter of jabbing and testing until the three concluded that they had done their best. The smooth, white meat looked like the breast of a Rhode Island Red. How did it taste? Like a delicate blend of chicken and quail. That first experiment so encouraged End that he invested \$130 to found the Floridian Products Com-

pany, world's only canners of rattlesnake meat, and his original investment has grown to a business worth \$150,000.

Last year 15,000 cans of Genuine Diamondback Rattlesnake Meat with Supreme Sauce were sold at \$1.25 a can. In swank restaurants from New York to Los Angeles you can order rattlesnake on toast without fear of mock understanding by a diplomatic waiter or the bum's rush from a rowdy bouncer. One distinguished hotel advertises "Diamondback Rattlesnake Salad *en Casserole*"; another, "Choice Tenderloin of Rattlesnake." A famous Chicago dining place offers a two-dollar chafing dish special. Rattlesnake is also served cold, as a relish or canapé, or warmed and garnished as a sandwich.

In public eating places, of course, the fact that meat comes from a rattlesnake must be made plain. In his own home, many a host has served it as *coquille St. Patrick* or rare *rosits en strombridge*, or any other deceptive mumbo-jumbo. When the guest comments on its

taste he is casually told of its origin. If that doesn't floor him he is handed a card (printed by Mr. End) hailing him as a member of "The Ancient Epicurean Order of Rattling Reptile Revelers." There are over 50,000 members — including the entire Negaunee, Michigan, Fire Department (thirty in all) who wrote in for cans and cards. End sent a can to the Duke of Windsor when he was King, and got an acknowledgement. "A short while after Windsor got the rattlesnake meat he abdicated," says End. "Maybe it gave him enough gumption to quit his job and marry the girl."

When Florida tourists clamored to see the rattlesnake cannery, End woke up to the fact that he had a first-class attraction. He chose Tampa, a center of tourist activity, as the place for his Reptilium. There, under the palms, 20,000 people in the last year have taken the tour of the establishment. Visitors may see snakes, touch snakes, eat snakes and be photographed with live snakes around their necks, if they like, as many do. Last year the Post Office Department permitted End to publicize his benefactors through a special mailing center. Philatelists in every clime now gloat over stamps postmarked "Rattlesnake, Florida."

End has also exploited rattlesnake by-products, much as cattlemen do with the products of the range. Skins are converted into shoes, belts, sport jackets (at \$75 and up), berets and neckties. Venom goes to laboratories for medical purposes. Fat and crystallized gall are turned into pharmaceuticals.

Not so long ago, End readily admits, the sight of a snake made his knees wobble. Now the recouped family fortune has impressed on him the fact that a snake is a thing of beauty. "Take this chicken snake," he says, holding up a wriggling six-footer, underside up. "Notice the wonderful iridescence as the sun plays on it." And it *is* a colorful sight, like a dazzling golden mosaic. There are exquisite patterns on the skin of a corn snake just beginning to shed, and the markings and colorings of a milk snake are like fine old tapestry. End contends that nowhere else in nature can one find such rhythm of color and movement. He is also convinced that in the relationship between snakes and men it is the lack of familiarity which breeds contempt. As tourists watch him handling the snakes, their attitude changes. Soon many of them are posing like snake charmers on the bally platform for the edification of the folks at home.

II

End is forty-five, a native of Sheboygan, Wisconsin. He graduated from Swarthmore and was attending the Columbia School of Journalism in 1915 when Dr. Michael Pupin organized the Columbia University Relief Organization to Serbia. End joined up. Then he attached himself to the French Army in time to get into some of the worst fighting. Later he shifted to the AEF. After that, until he cornered the rattlesnake market, he bounced from journalism to insurance selling and from a job as oil-company representative to truck farming. He is a small man whose dark eyes and dab of moustache give him a Charlie-Chaplinesque appearance. From his timid look he is about the last person one would pick to do tricks with rattlesnakes and make a profit from them.

Almost everyone who visits the Reptiliorium has to be convinced that rattlesnake meat really is food. Whenever he is questioned as to the meat's edibility, End always selects an outstanding food distributor in the doubter's home town and clinches the argument with his name. His educational routine includes another master stroke of showmanship designed to show that even rattlesnake venom

is harmless — when taken internally. He will guide a group to a pen full of vicious looking Diamondbacks, their buzzers sounding off in eerie discord. End takes a stick with a hook at the end and neatly lifts one of the rattlers out of the pen onto the ground. The spell-bound group takes a unified backward step. "There's no need to do that," the rattlesnake baron tells them soothingly. "It's tommyrot to believe that this rattler can jump off the ground to strike. His reach is like that of a boxer. He can't get beyond one-third of his length. And he crawls so slowly that you can easily get out of his way."

End then pins the rattler's head to the ground, and with a deft movement places his fingers on the head and picks the snake up. With a little instrument⁵ like a button-hook, he pries open the snake's mouth, hooks the fangs and pulls them over the side of an ordinary drinking glass. A push or two on the sacs in the rattler's mouth and the venom squirts into the glass.

"See, it's like a hypodermic needle," he tells the fascinated group. "If this fellow were to get hold of you he'd jab these fangs into you and then let go with the venom." He holds the glass up and shows the yellowish liquid. "Here, taste it," he invites. "See if you

don't think it tastes like the white of an egg." The victim blanches, looks for the nearest exit. End then lifts the glass to his mouth and takes a sip of the poisonous fluid. Nothing happens, except that he goes on with his talk:

"This stuff is albumen — exactly the same as the white of an egg. You could take egg white and inject it into your blood stream, and it would kill you just as quickly as this rattlesnake ammunition. And, vice versa, you could take this venom and make as delicious a meringue for lemon pie as you could with the best eggs." The cooks in the crowd usually indicate by their silence that they'll stick with the hen fruit, but by such methods End helps persuade diners to string along with this particular delicacy. When the meat was introduced in Paris for the first time at the Société Nationale d'Acclimation de France, this instructive note appeared on its menu:

Rattlesnakes or *crotales* (*crotales adamanteus*) are reptiles found in abundance in certain sections of America. Their flesh was already prized there generations ago, in the days of that remarkable civilization in North America before Columbus; and we hear that it constituted one of the favorite meats of the Aztecs, whose tastes were particularly refined. The consumption of these serpents does not present any danger, for the venom glands are localized in the head. The Society hereby de-

nounces those among you, learned as you may be, who pronounce it unfit for food.

III

Some fifty men and women supply End with rattlesnakes. Some of the most successful professional hunters are women. One wizened, overalled farmer brought in seven in an old flour sack and received \$20 for his day's work. There are twenty-six varieties of rattlesnakes in the country, but only the Great Eastern Diamondback grows to sufficient length and weight to warrant canning. "Some of the Texas snakes may have length but they don't have the biceps," is End's explanation. About 2500 Diamondbacks were slaughtered last year to meet the growing demand. They are killed generally in the evening and hung up for twenty-four hours. Evening hours aren't selected out of respect to the popular belief that "a snake doesn't die till sun-down," but there is some validity in the saying. "We find that the cooler night hours bring on the cessation of movement quicker than the daytime," End says. "I have seen the body of a rattler dead fifteen hours crawl out of the pan. The head is just as dangerous for many hours after it has been cut off as before. Pass your hand

above the decapitated snake's head and cause lights and shadows to flicker and you'll usually find the head will turn over. We never consider the rattler's head safe until it has been off for at least twenty-four hours."

After the all-night bleeding process, the snakes are skinned and dressed. They are then cooked, under a pressure cooker, just enough to allow the meat to be separated from the spine. Then the spices and special sauces are added. The meat is chopped into small slices, packed into cans, then sealed and again cooked.

End delights in debunking accepted ideas about the habits of his reptilian livestock. He points out that 95 per cent of the Diamondback rattlesnake's diet consists of cottontail rabbits, one of the cleanest and most wholesome of animals, and that the snake itself is unusually clean and healthy. He says its rattles, commonly supposed to serve for sounding a warning, are actually the snake's primary means of obtaining food. To say that a rattler is a "slow-moving" creature is to underestimate the lightning-like speed with which it strikes. Once it is within striking distance of a victim — a distance which never exceeds thirty inches — its swift blow is breathtaking.

End therefore takes issue with recent teachings which would minimize the danger of the deadly reptile. "The more I handle them, the more I respect them," he says. "I'm on guard every second. The fangs of the larger rattlesnakes can pierce any bootleather that has not been lined with aluminum sheeting or several layers of very fine metallic mesh."

A few years ago it looked as if the supply of rattlesnakes would be one of the least of End's worries. But with increasing demands for his product, supply becomes a definite problem. At this time, one of the country's largest grocery chains is negotiating on the possibility of placing the tiny cans of snake meat in its stores throughout the land. "If that deal goes through," End says, "I'll have to undertake something I never thought I'd need — a rattlesnake preserve. I'll have to take about twenty-five acres of high ground — stock it with well-fed rabbits and see that the right palmetto thatches and cool ponds are available — and grow my own rattlesnakes."

Which would only add the proper finishing touch to the story of the man who couldn't grow a squash or pack a porker, but who took a rattlesnake and introduced it to a knife and fork.

► *Research is yielding important data and the possibility of new curative techniques.*

NEW FACTS ON HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE

BY IAGO GALDSTON, M.D.

A TINY silver clamp, in the hands of an ingenious scientist, has served to illuminate one of the most baffling afflictions affecting the middle-age group of our population. The scientist is Dr. Harry Goldblatt of the Western Reserve University, Cleveland. The disease is essential hypertension. In the language of the layman, this disorder can be described as excessively high blood pressure not due to disease of the heart or the blood vessels or to manifest disease of the kidneys.

The part played by the tiny silver clamp in the illumination of this baffling problem is of great significance. It made possible the experimental production of persistent high blood pressure in animals, a feat not heretofore achieved. In the six years that have elapsed since Goldblatt first reported his studies, more progress has been made in the study of this disorder than was made in the preceding century. Though it causes more deaths than cancer, essential hypertension is little known to the public, which

generally associates high blood pressure with hardening of the arteries and with "kidney disease."

Essential hypertension is the gravest problem of middle life. It is responsible for more than one fourth of all deaths occurring among those of fifty years of age and over. And yet until recently we knew very little of its cause, or causes. Even now, the problem is far from solved. However, the work of Goldblatt and his associates, and that of many others who have taken up the study, has evidently put us well on the way toward a solution. All the clues point to the kidneys as being at the root of the trouble. But the clues are of a rather unexpected kind. They suggest that the kidneys secrete into the blood one or more substances which influence the blood pressure. According to this view, essential hypertension is a disease resulting from a disturbance in the internal secretory functions of the kidneys.

To understand this, and furthermore to understand the achievements of Goldblatt and his minute