

Variety Meats

Elizabeth Boyle, Ph.D.
Department of Animal Sciences and Industry
Kansas State University
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Tongue, brains, sweetbreads, heart and liver are among the edible organs and glands that are commonly called variety meats. These products are used in many gourmet entrees and are popular menu items in fine restaurants. In the U.S., some variety meats are used in the production of processed meat products, especially sausage. Not only are most variety meats economical, they are excellent sources of many nutrients.

Liver is one of the best known variety meats. It is covered with a thick membrane that should be removed before cooking. Liver is often sliced thin and fried, broiled, sauteed or braised. A 3 1/2 ounce serving of fried beef liver provides nearly one ounce of high quality protein. Beef liver is an excellent source of B vitamins, particularly B₁₂ and riboflavin, and vitamin A. Braunschweiger or liver sausage, pate de foie and other products with liver in the product name contain a minimum of 30 percent liver.

The thymus glands from veal, calves and young beef, and the pancreas gland from pork are called sweetbreads. Although sweetbreads are a delicacy, most consumers do not know how to prepare and cook sweetbreads. Typically, sweetbreads are battered and breaded, then sauteed or fried, or they may be broken into small pieces and mixed with scrambled eggs. Brains are commonly prepared similar to sweetbreads.

Chitterlings are made from thoroughly cleaned and cooked pork intestines. They may be served with sauces or cut into small pieces, breaded and fried. "Rocky mountain oysters" or "fries" are beef or lamb testicles that have been sliced, breaded and fried. A hog maw is the stomach of a hog that is usually stuffed with seasoned meat and vegetables, then roasted.

Beef tongue is available fresh, pickled, corned, smoked and canned. Because tongue has a tough outer membrane and is one of the less tender variety meats, tongue requires slow, moist heat cooking methods. After cooking and the membrane has been removed, tongue is an excellent sandwich meat. Moist slow cooking is also needed to cook beef heart, while young lamb and veal hearts are more tender and can be fried.

Cattle have a four-compartment stomach. Tripe is lining from the first compartment known as the rumen, and the second compartment called the reticulum. Plain or smooth tripe from the rumen is less tender than honeycomb tripe from the reticulum. Tripe is best cooked using moist heat and may be served with sauces, added to soup or be the main ingredient in meat dishes.

Fresh variety meats are more perishable than other meats. They should be cooked and served soon after purchase, or frozen. A large selection of variety meats are available to suit your taste preference and budget.