



LISHISH FARE: Owen Mapp shows off his delectable possum casserole.

Possums there for the eating

By K GURUNATHAN

There are between 70 to 90 million of them and, as eco-pests, they happily chomp through seven million tonnes of vegetation every year.

Paraparaumu resident Olive Baldwin says Kiwis should happily chomp into the possum numbers to not only save our forests from devastation but also provide a source of high quality protein, especially during these times of spiralling food prices. "Most Kiwis won't touch it out of ignorance more than anything else. It's our national duty to do so, really," said Mrs Baldwin, who used to do her own hunting until problems with her knees put an end to that. Over the years, however, she had developed a network of locals who shared her view that the surrounding forests of the Kapiti Coast, and even the suburban gardens and public reserves, were a huge pantry harbouring fresh meat. "And it's the same for every town and city in this country," she said.

"There is the fear of TB in some people's minds. Cooking it thoroughly kills off any TB. People who buy factory-raised chicken and pork should realise they are eating meat poisoned by hormones and chemicals and bred in very cruel conditions. In contrast, possums lead natural happy lives.

"They are out there and we should be making better use of this resource instead of poisoning them with 1080."

Mrs Baldwin said there was a growing cultural economy centred around the hunting, cooking and celebration of possum meat, including informal trading in the meat carried across New Zealand at local community level.

The trade in possum meat could be legal, such as that carried out by Auckland company Arex International, which exported possum carcasses to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, where it was known as Kiwi Tree Bear. At \$27 a kilo it was promoted as a healthy, low-cholesterol dish. Dishes could cost between \$13 to \$65 depending on the preparation.

Part of Mrs Baldwin's network included her son and medical doctor, Dave Baldwin. He ran the Bulls Flying Doctor Service from Palmerston North Airport and sometimes picked up possum pies – a novelty wildfood – baked at the kitchens of The Bush

► OWEN MAPP'S POSSUM CASSEROLE

First catch/shoot one possum. Skin and gut the possum. (Check organs for any obvious disease, if so bury the animal). Remove all glands from tail and throat area. Section the body into serviceable portions (throw away rib cage and the attached section of spine), use a heavy knife to chop up remaining lower spine and back steaks. Use a casserole dish for the meat pieces and sufficient water to almost cover. Mix the following and add to the meat:

- Teaspoon of cayenne.
- Six or so crushed garlic cloves.
- One or two onions diced.
- Several sprigs of thyme, cut up fine.
- Pinch of oregano, basil, other herbs.
- Pepper to taste.

Mix and stir the following:

- Serving spoon of peanut butter.
- Teaspoon of honey.

Dissolve both in hot water and stir in.

Add liberal dash of soy sauce. Cover in with a sheet of tin foil and put in oven at 200C for two hours or so. Check to see if tender, take off the foil and brown up the meat for a short period. Don't let it burn dry. And there you have it, ready to serve.

Centre at Pukekura, South Westland, and delivered them to the Paraparaumu Airport for his mother to pick up. The pies were then distributed to the local aficionados of possum meat. One of them was nationally known craftsman-artist Owen Mapp. Living on the suburban fringe, Mr Mapp said he caught up to 40 possums a year off his Ruapehu Street section. "My daughters, Tal and Tamara, were raised on possum meat in various forms and still request their favourite casserole for birthday dinners," he said.

The government spent up to \$6 million a year keeping possum numbers in check. Mrs Baldwin and her merry network of possum gobblers thought greater awareness and promotion of the meat as a table dish could go a long way to holding down those numbers at a fraction of the cost.