

Venison

There are four rules to follow to get the best venison

By John Wootters

There are three kinds of venison-eaters: 1) those who love it, 2) those who don't, and 3) those who won't try it because they've been told that deer meat is "strong" or "gamy-tasting" ... or because they were once fed a piece that fit that description.

Venison can be pretty rank, or it can be sweet and tender. What it cannot be is pork or beef or lamb. If you treat lamb like beef and expect it to taste like beef, you'll probably be disappointed. Venison – or any other meat, wild or tame – must be taken for what it is, and not for what it isn't.

One of the things venison is, however, is healthy food. It's low in cholesterol and fat, and packed with high-quality protein. It does contain some natural salt, thus needs little added salt in cooking (which tends to make it tougher, anyway).

There are four rules to follow for

Venison can be pretty rank, or it can be sweet and tender. What it cannot be is pork or beef or lamb.

palatable venison. First, ignore the smelly old mossyhorn bucks in favor of a fat doe or spike.

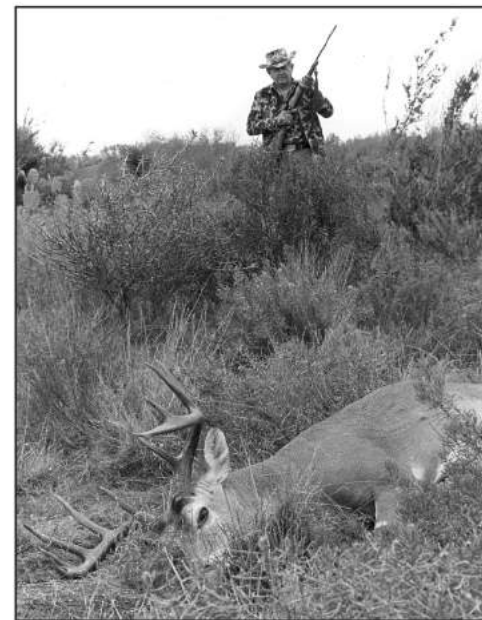
Second, remember that any meat animal that died while its body condition was improving will be at its best. That generally means as early in the hunting season as possible. If the animal's condition is deteriorating, as during wintertime or the middle of a hard rut, the flesh is likely to be tough and off-flavored no matter how you handle it.

Third, death must be as nearly instantaneous as possible. A deer that ran a few hundred yards after the first bullet and took four more shots to die is not fit to eat. Quick kills come from

precision shooting (and using enough rifle). Good shooting comes from target practice and study of animal anatomy. It's not especially difficult to drop a deer in its tracks, and it is not only humane but makes for prime meat.

Fourth, the quicker the body heat leaves the carcass, the more tender will be the steaks. That means prompt cleaning and skinning. I know it's more convenient to leave the hide on while bringing the carcass to a processor, but doing so makes the meat tougher.

Obviously, the carcass cannot be hung in camp in hot weather, with or without the hide, and remain fresh and sweet. If it's too far to the locker, skin the carcass and break it down as far as Texas Parks & Wildlife regulations permit (check the latest rulings) and store it in an icebox with lots of crushed ice. Don't worry about the meltwater spoiling the meat; it's much less damaging than hanging in a tree overnight at 50 degrees. Add ice often.



John Wootters photo

A quick kill, the result of precision shooting, is an important factor in getting the best venison.

Whether you butcher your deer or have it done professionally, these steps will provide a freezerful of premium-grade eatin' that you cannot buy anywhere for love nor money.

Now for the cooking. Forget about

See Venison, Page 7

Thursday, October 23, 2003

West Kerr Hunters Guide

Page 7

Venison

Continued from Page 6

"tenderizing marinades"; there is no magic formula that will convert tough venison to tender venison. If the meat is really tough, you shot the wrong deer. If a little tough, pounding with a tenderizing hammer and liberal use of Adolph's Meat tenderizer may help. Most marinades are best regarded merely as flavoring agents. Out of habit, I soak venison cutlets, backstraps, tenders, etc. for an hour or so in buttermilk, which seems to give a slightly milder taste.

Venison from almost anywhere in the carcass can be soaked in any commercial fajita marinade and grilled, then sliced thin and served as fajitas with the usual sautéed sliced onion and bell pepper.

For plain grilling, I rub the meat all over lightly with a product called CHAR-CRUST (Hickory and Molasses), available at the Austin Central Market but at last inquiry, not at the San Antonio store. This stuff makes a real difference in tenderness and juiciness, not only with venison but even prime beef. The cardinal sin with venison is overcooking ... which can be defined as cooking it to any degree of

doneness much beyond medium rare.

For other kinds of cooking, bear in mind that venison is a dry, mostly fat-free meat. Therefore I use a lot of it as ground meat in stews, chili and soups. The distinctive venison flavor goes especially well in Mexican dishes, and I usually substitute it wherever ground beef is called for.

Not being a heavy-duty sausage lover, I can offer no advice about venison sausage, but I heartily endorse venison hamburger which was ground together with uncooked hickory-smoked bacon, an option now available from some processors.

Venison, however, doesn't need to be disguised in stews, chili, or sausage. It can stand on its own delicious merits. Following is an elegant recipe that you will not be ashamed to serve to any guest, no matter how important or worldly.

Venison Embrey deserves a really good merlot or cabernet for company, served in stemware and accompanied by gracious toasts. The hard part is keeping a bunch of hungry hunters from snatching pieces of the meat before you get the salad tossed. The cooking aromas alone are enough to lure an angel down from heaven!

VENISON EMBREY

- 3/4 cup flour
- 1/2 cup grated parmesan cheese
- 1 tsp. Lowrey's Seasoned Salt
- 1-1/2 lbs. venison backstrap, sliced diagonally in 1/4-inch slices
- 3/4 stick butter, divided use
- 6 to 7 lg. mushrooms, sliced
- 3 sliced green onions, including tops
- 1/2 cup beef broth
- 1 tbsp. lemon juice
- 1/4 cup dry white wine
- parsley

Combine flour, parmesan cheese, and seasoned salt in a plastic bag. Add sliced venison and shake to coat meat.

Melt half of butter in a large, heavy skillet and brown meat one minute on each side over medium-high heat. Do not crowd the meat in the skillet; never allow the separate pieces to touch. Remove from skillet and set aside.

Melt remainder of butter in the same skillet, add mushrooms and onions and sauté until tender. Add broth, wine, and lemon juice.

Return meat to skillet, cover, and simmer about 30 minutes.

To serve, pour pan juices over meat and sprinkle with chopped parsley. Serves about six.

— source: *The Rockport Collection*