

ADVICE FOR NO-FAIL BURGERS, STEAKS AND ROASTS.

DEER DONE RIGHT

John Motoviloff

Everyone knows that the passion for deer hunting runs strong in Wisconsin. But, let's face it: some hunters and their families just aren't wild about venison. Why? "It's gamey," they say. "It tastes like liver," others complain. "It's tough," some claim. Fortunately, none of these things has to be true about Wisconsin venison. In fact, when cared for and cooked properly, it is every bit as tender and tasty as organic, grass-fed beef. But, venison is *not* beef and that's where cooks often take a wrong turn.

Ruminants gone wild

Just what kind of animal are deer, then? Like cattle and goats, deer belong to the hooved, four-footed group of animals known as ruminants, which have complex digestive tracts meant to break down the grasses and forbs they eat. But, unlike domestic ruminants with easy access to food and water, wild deer have to work hard to survive. Because food might be limited due to habitat quality or time of year, or due to the presence of large predators, deer must pursue a variety of foods. Fruits, nuts, grasses, woody browse, and waste grain are all staples of a Wisconsin whitetail's diet at various times of the year. Because of this varied diet, white-tailed deer have great natural flavor and very little fat compared to domestic livestock. This can be a winning combination for cooks — if they know how to handle it.

The culinary challenge lies in retaining venison's unique flavor while keeping it moist and tender. A shift from a "beef" mindset to a "venison" mindset is helpful. A handy way to think about the difference between the two meats is how they rate on what I call the Three Fs: fat, flame and flavor.

While beef *fat* can be tasty, what little fat there is on venison — and

this goes for venison sinew and silver-skin — tastes bad and should be trimmed away. This is why some people think they don't like venison: what they've eaten has a gamey taste because of fat left on it.

As far as *flame*, or heat level, venison should be cooked either quickly (in which case it should be marinated), or slow and low. Well-done venison is tough, dry and has a strong liver taste.

Finally, since venison has more natural *flavor* than beef, it needs less in the way of seasoning or side dishes.

No boeuf bourguignon or beef Wellington here. Stick to the basics

Venison on the grill is delicious. Remember to keep it moist by marinating and not overcooking.

and you'll be well on your way.

Burger, steaks and roasts – Oh my!

Let's begin with ground venison because it's what hunters are likely to have on hand. Like all ground meat, ground venison is "made" by the person grinding it — it's only as good or bad as the meat that goes into it.

Professional butcher shops and processors know what to put in and what to discard. If you are processing your own deer, trim away anything that's not meat. This lean meat that remains, however, will need something to help it stay moist. Mix one part ground beef or ground pork with three parts ground venison. For marinades, Greek or Italian salad dressing and teriyaki sauce are good. Meatloaves can be made according to your favorite recipe, with a suitable amount of ground pork or beef added to the venison. Ground pork

Nothing takes the sting out of a cold day — or livens up deer camp — like good venison chili.

sausage or chopped bacon added to venison patties makes a delicious camp breakfast. For those who want to limit fat, plain ground venison makes tasty tacos, chili and spaghetti sauce.

As with ground venison, what is used for steak is up to you. You can tell the processor what proportion of steaks you would like. If you're processing the deer yourself, you are in complete control of what gets labeled "steak."

Obvious steak cuts include the inside tenderloins, the backstraps and the inner muscle from the back haunch. However, I've used just about any cut of venison — with the exception of the shanks — that can be sliced an inch thick for steaks. And whether your deer is commercially processed or a DIY job, make one final pass over the meat before cooking. Trim away all sinew, fat and silverskin. Keep an eye out for hairs, which you can remove with a tweezers or damp cloth.

To keep your steaks moist, marinate them before cooking — an hour for young deer, two to four hours for older animals. Steak sauce, Italian or Greek salad dressing, and teriyaki sauce are good standbys. Make your own marinade with three parts high-acid liquid to one part oil. Red wine, Worcestershire sauce and soy sauce are good bases; flavor-neutral oils like peanut and canola work well. Avoid olive oil, which tends to be overpowering.

Green herbs, garlic, onion, crushed chili pepper and ginger are nice additions. A tablespoon of tart jam, like currant or raspberry, adds a nice counterpoint. As with burgers, cook or grill

steaks rare or medium. This keeps the flavor lively and the meat juicy.

Roasts are a different beast, which take to a slow-and-low treatment. It's important to remember that this is not marbled chuck roast or pork shoulder to be cooked at 350 degrees and forgotten about. Venison roasts — any chunk of meat from the front or back haunches that weighs more than 2 pounds — are best coated in flour, quickly browned in hot oil or bacon drippings and then slow cooked in an oven or crockpot. Customize the flavor by adding your liquid of choice: red wine, dark beer, broth, onion soup or apple cider. The fruits or vegetables I add depend on the flavor I am pursuing. Onions and mushrooms go well with wine or beef broth; sauerkraut compliments beer; dried fruit is a natural with wine or chicken broth. A typical 4-pound roast — seared and cooked in a 250-degree oven — will be ready in about three hours. Double the cooking time if using a crockpot.

Super sides

Whether you are serving burgers, steaks or roasts, you want something basic and hearty on the side. Fledgling cooks might be tempted to gild the lily here with fancy sides, but that's unnecessary. Mashed or oven-browned potatoes are crowd pleasers, as are egg noodles and spätzel. Wild rice and rice pilaf work equally well. Sop up the delicious drippings with crusty sourdough bread.

A crisp green salad or some kind of fruit — homemade applesauce or cranberry sauce — pro-

vides a nice counterpoint. Dry red wine or your beer of choice keeps things festive. And nothing crowns a game dinner like apple cobbler topped with vanilla ice cream.

Trim the fat, watch the heat, keep it moist — and enjoy! ❧

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RECIPES TO GIVE A TRY

BEST VENISON

2 pounds venison steaks trimmed of fat, sinew and silverskin or 1 ½ pounds ground venison mixed well with ½ pound ground beef and formed into patties

Fresh-ground black pepper

Sea salt

½ cup Worcestershire sauce

3 tablespoons peanut oil

1. Season meat liberally with black pepper and salt.
2. Whisk together Worcestershire sauce and peanut oil.
3. Pour marinade over meat; cover and let stand one hour.
4. Grill or pan-fry so meat is still rosy in the middle.
5. Serve with garlic mashed potatoes and green salad.

VENISON ROAST WITH DRIED FRUIT

This is a good dish for a winter day, or to serve when company is coming over. It's deeply satisfying and comforting.

One 4-pound venison roast, trimmed of visible fat and sinew (don't dig into the roast to trim hidden layers)

Thyme, sea salt, and black pepper to taste

Flour

4 garlic cloves, sliced into spears (optional)

4 tablespoons melted bacon drippings

12 ounces beef broth or dry red wine

½ pound dried fruit such as prunes, cherries, cranberries alone or in combination

1. Preheat oven to 250 degrees.
2. Season roast liberally with salt, pepper and thyme.
3. Dredge with flour.
4. (Optional) Pierce roast in several places and insert garlic spears. Do this if you like garlic; skip if you don't.
5. In a large Dutch oven, heat bacon drippings and sear roast well on all sides; add wine or broth and dried fruit.
6. Cover and cook for three hours, or until roast falls apart when touched with a fork.
7. Serve with egg noodles and homemade cranberry sauce.

