

Venison_Processing_FAQ_1996.txt

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Since I've been asked for inclusion in a FAQ, I figured I'd go over this account and do it right. Here's a pretty well complete tutorial on what to do with Bambi (or more accurately Faline) when you pot one. Reprint or archive it anywhere you want electronically, just credit the author. Enjoy!

"Euwww," cry the husband/wife/children of the mighty hunter who has just dragged home the antlered kill. "This stuff is gamy and yucky. Do we hafta eat it?"

Disappointed, and maybe secretly agreeing with the spouse and kids, the mighty hunter chokes down his or her portion of venison and declaims in a hearty voice that it's perfectly good and really just like beef if you grind it into burgers and mix it with salt pork so you can't taste the deer.

This is a rather sad scenario that has undoubtedly been played out more times than most hunters (and cooks) care to think about. Why? It isn't because venison is a poor quality meat; far from it. The finest chefs serve medallions of venison braised with sauce Perigourdine and Merlot in their fancy restaurants, and they get a hefty price for it because they know how to cook it properly to maximize the enjoyable flavor. More importantly, they know how to obtain it from the right source, which is a young and healthy animal in prime eating condition.

The majority of game that tastes gamy, nasty, raunchy, sour or just plain awful does so for one of two reasons: either you messed up in the process

of picking a target or you didn't treat the meat properly after you killed it - sadly common outcomes among today's generation of sport hunters who kill for antlers and not for meat.

Pick and treat your meat properly in the first place, and you will not have any gaminess to worry about, nor will you need to disguise the fine taste of properly prepared venison with strong flavored marinades. Venison which is butchered quickly and professionally with a high standard of hygiene and care is comparable to the finest cuts of lean beef - only better and more flavorful - and it has absolutely no gamy or unpleasant taste.

However, if you pick an animal to shoot that is not a good meat animal, for reasons of age, sex or rutting condition, you don't have anybody to blame save yourself if the results are not pleasant. If you shoot an old, tough, nasty buck in rutting condition because you want trophies, your dinner will taste crappy and you will have silly pointy things to hang on your wall and brag about. Enjoy your bragging rights and choke on your tough, testosterone-laden dinner, and don't say you weren't warned.

If you want to eat as opposed to rustically decorate your fireplace, eyeball out a young doe with a nice chunky brisket-shaped chest bespeaking plenty of fat. Look for graceful rounding in the hindquarters as well; you want fat hams, and the rump is where well-fed deer tend to put on padding.

Choose your target not for massive size or horned protruberances, but for a body conformation that indicates a plump, young, tasty meat animal. Read agricultural texts or butchering handbooks for better information on how to judge this, and study the pictures of cows, pigs and sheep carefully until you are confident that you know by the eye at least some of the characteristics that distinguish a fine meat animal from a poor one. Then go out hunting; your taste buds will be better pleased with the results.

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Some folks say that wild game fat is rancid; I suspect that these are the trophy-hunting folks who want to go shooting aged, tough males for the dinner table. Silly people. If you must take bucks, take the spikes; an old animal is a tough animal. You wouldn't eat a cow that old, would you? Well, maybe you would, but my palate will take a pass, thanks. I'll take the plump young meat animals every time, preferably 18 months to 2 years old.

Fresh yellow-white fat from a well-marbled deer which has been grazing in somebody's cornfield is perfectly good food; the main danger here is eating too much of it and getting fatty deposits on your hindquarters your own self. ;P Check each carcass as you process it by frying a small portion of the fat and tasting it; individuals can vary. But don't chuck this lovely stuff until you have at least tried it. Venison confit crocked in its own fat and drained is stunningly spectacular with garlic mashed potatoes and sun-dried cranberry sauce, among other things, and the sizzling fat from a side of deer ribs popping and browning over the fire is an almost primal trigger to the hunter's appetite.

If you want this clean-tasting fat, don't hunt in areas where the deer are known for desperate grazing habits; strong tasting fodder can and does affect the taste of both fat and muscle meat. You'll figure it out if you shoot an otherwise good meat animal and it tastes like a pine pitch and mud marinade. Grouse is game that is famous for this problem in particular, but deer suffer from it too if they're browsing too much on scrub or tree bark. Get as quick a kill as you can, for mercy's sake and also for the meat's sake; an animal that dies in pain and fear is not as good eating as an animal that dies quick and clean.

So much for the hunting precautions. On to the butchering. Once you kill the animal, draw it as quickly as possible. Forget any silliness about cutting its throat; if you must finish it with a mercy stroke, use a brisket stick, thrusting your knife into the brisket at first a straight

then an upward angle to sever the arteries around the heart. See a good butcher's handbook for pictures and information on the correct method of brisket sticking.

If you are not confident you can do an accurate brisket stick and the animal must be put down quickly, use a throat stab, not a throat slice. Insert (stab) the knife blade side facing outward as close to the animal's spine on the throat side as possible. Pull straight forward with a single swift move until everything from the front of the spine out to the throat is severed. This technique reliably severs a throat; slicing tends to be useless and unnecessarily cruel if you do not have the strength or the expertise to do it properly. Often, an inexperienced hunter will miss one or both jugulars or cut insufficiently deep to bleed the animal out quickly using the slice technique. The stabbing technique essentially can't miss and it *removes* the throat from the spine out, also severing the windpipe.

If you are approaching a downed deer that is still alive, approach from the back if possible. Those hooves are razor sharp and horns are no joke either. If you can get on its back and an arm around a doe's neck forcing the chin up, the throat stab-and-pull maneuver is easy and finishes the deer rapidly. If your downed quarry has antlers, use them as handles and pull the head up this way instead. Speed is of the essence; every second your downed quarry remains alive, terrified and struggling increases its suffering and decreases the quality of your fine steaks and chops.

Expect there to be some struggling and continued attempts to breathe even after the throat is severed. If this bothers you, sever the spine just between the skull and the first vertebrae with the deft insertion of a knife. WARNING - Don't attempt this technique on a live deer until you have practiced it and can do it reliably and quickly, one-handed, on a dead deer.

There is a reason I don't advocate spine severing, eye stabs or braincase

stabs as the first method of dispatch - it's dangerous, as the knife can slip on a struggling animal and hurt you badly.

It's better to wait for a clean shot in the beginning, but should you miss and cripple, it is your responsibility to finish the animal as quickly as possible. Some hunters use a second bullet or arrow at this stage, but there are certainly reasons to prefer finishing with a knife. Should you wish to save the blood, mix it immediately with vinegar in roughly 10-1 blood to vinegar proportions to use in a civet or sauce. You have about one to two minutes before it clots completely and is unusable for most culinary purposes.

Get those innards outwards as quickly as possible and wash and/or wipe the carcass down with a towel. If you have to field transport, leave the skin on, but get the skin off as soon as you make it to camp and get the temperature of that carcass down by any means you can, as fast as you can. A carcass left at blood temperature will quickly sour and ruin good meat, and getting the skin off helps heat to dissipate. Ice can be helpful, but be aware that moisture is not a good thing in general for meat, so you want to keep it dry if possible as well as cold.

To start processing Bambi, fist the hide off the deer while it is still warm from the kill, and mind those thin stringy flat pieces of muscle under the forelegs that will stick to the hide and make your job a pain if you don't catch them early on and separate them by slashing lightly ahead of the muscle and into the silvery-white, slimy translucent membrane that separates muscle and hide. Pliers may help in getting the "slippers" off from the lower legs. Watch out for those nasty hairs that get stuck in the membrane and take forever to wash out. Pull that hide and get it off your butchering floor. Plastic tarps are your friend.

Don't pull the membrane from the muscle (the silverskin) if you plan to hang the meat. Personally, I don't age venison if it's a fat young doe, but that's a matter of taste. Once you've hung the meat, you can trim

the silverskin, which should be a bit dry and hard in texture if you've hung it right (and it might even be blackened; this is common enough for an extended aging process). Some meat will go with it, but this is the price of aging.

I have two favorite ways to process a carcass. One of them is the traditional gambrel hang, with a cross-hatched stick splitting the legs and the deer hung from a tree. T'other, the one I pick when in my home facilities under ideal conditions, is a waist-height table with a raised metal surface which is holed to allow blood drainage.

Hang the deer up by its forelegs to let gravity do your work for you in removing those unpleasant bits. Unzip the front end of the deer carefully as you do not want the guts on your shoes in a hurry and by surprise, and have a barrel lined with a big Hefty garbage sack between the deer's legs. I make a **tiny** cut first, then slip my hand inside the carcass and keep two cupped fingers on the back of the knife as I cut. This keeps the guts from accidentally being slashed, which is as you probably can figure a really disgusting mess. Unzip slowly and let the guts fall down unbroken out of the slit you are making.

If you've done this technique right, you will have a mess of guts neatly in the barrel. Urge them into the right place with your hands. Wear latex gloves if you're fussy. Don't forget to get the stomach out too, and carefully sever any connections between the stomach and other organs. Let the stomach fall into the barrel; it's tough and won't burst unless you were clumsy with the knife earlier. The rest of the mass will likely remain attached; fish around the diaphragm (just under the heart and lungs) with a short bladed knife that is not too sharp and find the connections to cut when you're ready to dump the stomach and guts. You may find it helpful to haul out the guts in your fists and try to have the connective tissue visible before you cut into it. Small scissors can also be invaluable at this stage.

Don't forget to tie off the bung and find and *carefully* find and remove the bladder, or your meat will be unsanitary and smell funny. I once clumsily dropped a deer bladder I had just carefully removed, and it burst on my tennis shoes. The results were really unpleasant. Dispose of the bladder carefully and don't let go of the tube on the other end until you have a wastes bucket to dump it it.

Likewise, cut off the bung (the intestine leading up from the rectum) about eight inches from the bottom and tie it off carefully, after squeezing its contents to clear the area of your cut. Tie off both ends with a standard square knot. Without letting the cut ends touch flesh, dump the stomach and attached guts into the waste bucket and push the tied-off bung end through the rectum. Yes, I know this is gross. Do it anyways. Wear latex gloves and discard them when you are done touching these less than sanitary parts of the carcass. Take your knife and cut out the deer's entire rectum, with some flesh around it, including the tied-off bung. Carefully discard this unclean bit, without letting it touch the meat. Wash your hands. Wash any meat which has come in contact with this yuckiness very thoroughly, and cut out any discolored or suspect pieces. Discard the guts and waste away from your butchering area.

You can then fish around and grab a tough bundle of flesh up past the heart that is attaching the rest of the more solid innards to the carcass. Cut it as high up inside as you can reach, and pull. The whole mess will come down, so have another clean sack ready. This mess, except the green bubble attached to the liver, is good eating- don't waste it. Wash it well and save it on ice. You can eat the heart, the liver, the lungs, the spleen and the diaphragm, though I recommend throwing the latter scrap of tough flesh into the stock pot with the bones. Remove the nasty green gallbladder from the liver carefully and pitch it along with stomach and intestines.

You may wish to be extremely anal retentive about using all of your kill, and try to get something out of the deer's less pleasant parts. I used to

be. Two experiences washing out deer stomach and intestines and using them in haggis and sausage was enough to convince me to never mind. They take hours to wash free of ick and they don't taste all that wonderful anyhow. The only use for deer gall that I know of is authentically medieval ink, which you make by mixing in pounded oak ashes. Not in my food processor, thanks.

One small warning: the kidneys of a deer can range from flavorful to pungent and disagreeable; you can either discard or soak in milk overnight to reduce ammoniacal odor and taste. The kidneys of a rutting buck aren't even worth discussing; no marinade can save them, except possibly turpentine. There is only one recipe worth thinking about for buck kidneys in my opinion, and it is this: bake the kidneys underneath a hot brick in the oven for 8 hours. When finished, discard the kidneys and eat the brick, which will probably taste better.

Take a hose to the inside of the carcass once it is gutted out, or if you are field butchering away from a water source, wipe down with a damp cloth thoroughly. Dry the meat with a clean towel before proceeding. If the day is hot, throw some ice in the carcass instead and skip the dry towel - the moisture content of the meat might suffer, but the temperature is more important.

At this point, you have a whole mess of tasty and hopefully clean-smelling meat ready for your processing. You can hang at this stage if you like (I don't, especially with a doe whose hindquarters are covered in nice yellow fat - mmmm!), but you can also proceed to dismember into neat freezer and fridge packages. A fresh-killed deer keeps a surprisingly long time in the refrigerator, but your results may vary depending on the condition and holding temperature of your refrigerator.

I separate the meat into: shanks for long braising (venison osso bucco is delish!), two shoulders, two hams which I usually bone out, a whole saddle roast (that's the butt end minus the bare bone you have left after

the legs are gone), a crown tenderloin roast with the backbone split in half and about 6" of the ribs still on, two slabs of ribs for immediate BBQ slathered in homemade sauce, the neck for stewing and the flank for scrap. You can further reduce the saddle or the crown tenderloin roast into chops; it depends on how many folks you want to invite over to eat.

Now, all of this is *damn* fine eating and the only parts I would turn into burger or sausage would be the flank, the neck and the shoulders of a lean deer. (A fat deer makes a nice shoulder roast!). The innards are nothing to waste, either. Stuffed deer heart with breadcrumbs and onions and bacon is marvellous, and if you're a medieval cook like I am, haggis is always in the works when I get hold of a nice chunk of internals that includes spleen and liver and lungs. Boiled deer tongue is not unlike beef tongue if you are fond of such things, and you can also use the jowl and palate meat in slivers in any French recipes calling for ox palate. Warning: skinning a deer head really and truly sucks, so less than die-hard medieval recreation enthusiasts may choose to skip this step. I've done it a number of times, but since I managed to get carpal tunnel syndrome, I'm not sure I'll ever do it again. It is some tedious and painful work, though you do get a nice "deer face" that you can flesh out and tan to make an interesting hat or shaman's pouch. Deer brains are good poached, but make sure you cook them well and don't mind the bottfly larvae that you will occasionally find in the nasal cavities of the skull as they're not uncommon to find. If you're squeamish, don't delve in there at all.

Even the bones of a deer can provide some amazingly good eating. Cut the bones into fairly small chunks (1-2") or have the butcher do it for you, roast them until lightly browned and boil down with the scrap meat for 4-6 hours for venison demiglace, which stores for months in the freezer and adds amazing flavor to all kinds of dishes.

If you must make sausage, make it well. Venison can actually make a very good sausage product that showcases rather than disguises its unique

flavor. Much depends on whether you do the sausage "black" or "white" style, ie, do you bleed and rinse the meat thoroughly first for a more delicate product, or do you make a civet with the reserved blood mixed with vinegar? The former will produce a mild, delicate product which takes well to a bit of sage, basil and shallot in the mix. The latter takes to onions and garlic or perhaps fennel or caraway. The middle ground is to use fresh venison that is neither washed and beaten free of blood or civetted, and much depends on the individual carcass - age, sex, diet, condition, etc.

A lot of hunters ignorant of fine venison cuisine turn the works into deerburgers or hash or sausage, trying to disguise its taste rather than showcase it with fine cooking. I suppose if you shoot a rutting buck deer and then don't gut it out before it sours, burgers or sausage or dogfood is a reasonable destination for such a wasted kill. But geez Louise, if you have a mountain of fine gourmet steaks and roasts and chops in front of you and you make mush out of them or allow them to spoil, you have just effectively pissed money away into the snow. Also it's bad karmic brownie points, y'know? Eat what you kill. Don't waste good food, or the life of an animal, senselessly. The Goddess is watching you. ;P

It is all very well I suppose to want to kill the biggest boy deer with the biggest antlers if you wish to prove your fitness to rule the herd and to mate with the does. I guess it's a phallic kind of guy thing. ;P Since I'm not a guy, I'll just take good venison where I can get it and never mind the big rack of antlers, a sure indication to me of a less than prime meat animal.

Rare roasted venison, fragrant with bay leaves and garlic on a bed of wild rice with pecans, is serious cuisine. Deer neck braised Moroccan style with lemons and honey and olives is delicious over cumin-scented couscous. Venison shanks osso bucco, steam-braised for hours in your oven, will fill the house with its tantalizing perfume until the neighbors sniff their noses into your yard and cry, "What's for dinner?"

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In a rougher setting, wrap chunks of lean hind leg or whole tenderloins in bacon and shishkebab them over the fire with a little cracked black pepper, or throw a slab of deer ribs on the fire and baste at the last minute with the best sauce your granny ever gave you a recipe for.

If you must make sausage, make it well. Don't disguise the taste of the meat; enhance it with the freshest herbs and the finest ingredients. The conventional wisdom is that deer fat is rancid; sometimes this is so and more often in my experience it isn't. Fry a small piece and judge for yourself for each carcass. If there isn't enough of it, add some fresh pork fat of the best quality, and possibly some veal meat, which does not overpower the venison as pork can do.

Venison should be done either rare or falling-off-the-bone well stewed for the tougher cuts such as neck or shank. To enhance the meat, marinades are permitted, but remember that if you've done your job well in selecting a good animal and butchering it cleanly, you don't need to overpower any gaminess with the marinade. Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlots are traditional companions of venison, and should you have some money to splurge, a fine red Bordeaux from one of the great vineyards would also not be amiss. These can be sipped along with the venison as well as making a fine marinade with the addition of some fresh herbs, garlic and best quality olive oil.

Dry coatings for a venison roast are as good as marinade and in many cases better; try powdered porcini mushrooms and pink peppercorns in seasoned flour, or crushed dried chanterelles and hazelnuts as a crust before roasting. Drizzle on some extra virgin olive oil for additional basting on your lean meat. Herbs du Provence, with lavender and rosemary, can add a note of delicate sweetness when balanced by the mellow sweet tang of balsamic vinegar. Keep your aceto balsamico in a small spray bottle; you will find it amazingly easy to do a thirty second spray-on "marinade" to all sorts of meats and vegetables that way, and it can give a lovely

caramelized look and taste to dishes like mashed potatoes or baked savory pies if you spray it on at the last minute.

To accompany venison, I recommend simple dishes with hearty, earthy flavors - a duxelle of dark wild mushrooms perhaps, or wild rice with roasted chestnuts and brandied dried cherries. The simplicity of fluffy mashed potatoes drizzled with a bit of olive oil and served with a head of softly sweet, caramelized roasted garlic always complements a good piece of venison. Vegetables on the grill can be sprayed briefly with balsamic vinegar and dipped in fine olive oil and herbs, and then seared briefly before joining the tender pieces of meat and the creamy pillows of mashed potatoes on your plate.

Any sauce you want to use on your high quality meat can of course be enhanced with truffles, and if you find yourself the fortunate possessor of some of this Perigourdine black gold, chop it very fine and simmer gently in a simple sauce made from the roasting venison juices thickened with a little cream and flour. Simmer (but do not boil) until your whole kitchen is perfumed with the indescribably savory aroma of venison and truffles. Then eat like the kings and queens of old, feasting on the finest viands in your kingdom. Your deer deserves it, don't you think? Not to mention the hunter.

Larousse Gastronomique gives recipes in plenty for venison done in this royal style, often enhanced with foie gras or other delicacies or enclosed in fine pastries. They knew how to properly treat a deer in that culinary era, to be sure; and none went wasted or unappreciated by the serious gourmet. The phenomemon of "deerburgers" is a modern abomination of antler-mad sport hunters who care nothing for cuisine and consider venison a mere by-product of the hunt instead of its object.

I have no moral qualms with hunting, but when it comes to wasting and mistreating fine meat, I will certainly have some words to say to the ignorant boor who does not respect his kill enough to use it properly.

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(The mildest are: Give it to me, you bozo, and I'll enjoy it properly if you're not going to!)

However you cook your deer, you should certainly enjoy the rightful reward of the hunt - the taste of venison in all its glory, not disguised but showcased and enhanced by careful handling of the meat and respectful cooking.

Bon appetit,

Tanith Tyrr
(camp butcher and chef for a fair share; California SF Bay area)