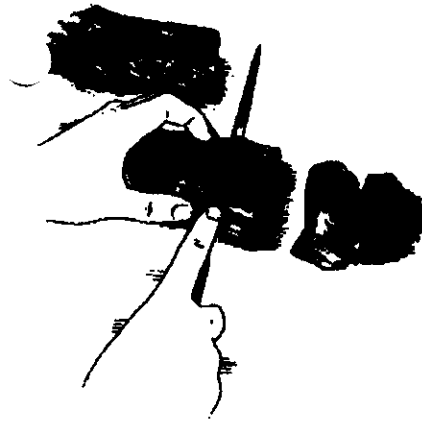


STEAK BASICS



1. Cut steaks 1½ to 2 inches thick only from the upper rear quarter: rump, tenderloin, and backstrap. This is where they are most likely to be tender. And if you're not sure how far to go cutting steaks, just take a sample 1-inch cube and cook it quickly in a lightly buttered skillet over medium-high heat. If it's tender, go ahead and steak it.

2. Marinate the steaks. If your steak still isn't as tender as you'd wish, marinades using wine, vinegar, or citrus juices with oil and herbs and spices taste great and help break down collagen as well. The simplest and cheapest marinade of all is buttermilk. Use about 1 cup per pound of steak, overnight. Then rinse in cold water, and you're ready to cook.



3. Cook them fast: For grilling use medium to medium-high heat; you should be able to hold your open palm at cooking level for four to six seconds only. This quick-sears the outside, keeping the juices inside. At this temperature, a 2-inch steak will be medium rare at about four minutes a side.

4. Don't cook the stuffing out of your steaks. As with beef, the most tender steaks are cooked rare to medium and no more. The closer you get to well done, the tougher the meat, and deer meat simply is too lean to survive the extra cooking. (Do not puncture the steaks while cooking or bringing them to the table. They don't have a lot of moisture to lose.)—E.C.



QUICK-AS-A-WINK WHITETAIL STEAKS

Guaranteed to get you out of the kitchen in less than half an hour and please your guests as well, this is my all-time favorite steak recipe.

1 pound whitetail steaks, ½ inch thick
8 tablespoons butter
2 cloves garlic, minced
4 ounces mushrooms, sliced
½ cup Marsala wine
3 green onions, chopped

In a 9-inch skillet, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter over medium-high heat. Add the steaks when the butter starts to sizzle, and cook 3 minutes a side for rare, 4 minutes a side for medium. Remove the steaks from the pan, and place on a heated platter. Cover.

Add the rest of the butter to the pan, lower the heat to medium, and sauté the garlic and mushrooms about 3 minutes, or until tender. Add the wine and green onions to the pan and bring the wine to a slow simmer. Return the steaks to the pan, smother in the sauce, and simmer another 2 to 3 minutes.—E.C.

TEMPTATION

Kim Martin is an excellent hunting guide, a talented chef, and a very good friend. He rented a room from me one winter back when we were baby-sitting goose hunters west of Houston. To my good fortune, he would wander into the kitchen occasionally and create something delicious.

Martin seldom got first taste of anything he cooked and never got more than half. One afternoon, while I was out brushing a blind, he bathed a fresh whitetail backstrap in custom marinade:

1 cup soy sauce
1 cup dark beer
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
2 tablespoons brown sugar
3 cloves fresh garlic, finely chopped

He buried the marinating venison in the refrigerator. The next day, as I slept off a mucky, 600-yard march with decoys and geese over my shoulders, Martin eased that tender cut into a hot oven.

When I awoke, the entire house smelled of sweet venison. I found the seared, medium-rare backstrap on a platter, surrounded by neat rows of crackers and thin slices of sharp cheddar...and a note: "I'll be back later with my girlfriend. Do not eat this."

Doorbell. Another guide, Tony Sappington, had come by to restring duck decoys.

"What'd he cook?"

"Backstrap, but there's a note."

Sappington studied the words, then smiled.

"So we won't eat the note," Sappington said, peeling back the plastic.

And we didn't. We left it on the platter—on top of the last cracker.—Doug Pike

(CHOICE) CUT AND RUN

YEARS AGO, EARLY IN MY DEER HUNTING CAREER, I BAGGED an 8-point buck on a South Texas ranch. A leathery wrangler offered to skin and butcher the field-dressed deer in exchange for "some of the meat."

My venison needs were modest, and a celebratory drink around the fire pit sounded more inviting than an hour or so with knives and saws in the barn, so I accepted the trade-out.

"How about if I save for you the backstraps—the best part, you know—and I'll take all the rest," he said, hunter to hunter.

"No problem," I replied, hunter to hunter.

The next morning, I found two neatly sliced straps folded in a plastic bag in the walk-in cooler. I collected the venison and the tagged antlers and drove back to Houston.

I related the story to a good friend who has many

years of deer hunting experience.

"What about the tenders?" he asked.

"The who?"

"The tenders—the fillets. You know, like the filet mignon with beef."

I, like many rookie hunters, assumed that backstraps and tenders were the same cut. The two straps, which run parallel to the backbone on the outside of the carcass, are indeed excellent meat, but the twin delicate tenders inside the cavity at the base of the hindquarters are choicest of all cuts.

Each slender tender on a whitetail deer is a foot or so in length, with perhaps the diameter of a silver dollar. Properly grilled and cut with a fork, a tender could make a venison lover out of a PETA supporter—assuming you don't let some camo-clad slick talk you out of them.

—JOE DOGGETT

P'LL MARRY YOU, BUT HOLD THE TANG

Back in college I tried to impress my girlfriend with dinner of barbecued deer ribs garnished with Cumberland sauce. As thick, greasy smoke rolled out of the broiler, I reread the sauce recipe. Okay, I was a little short of red currant jelly and fresh-squeezed orange juice. No problem: a quick search of the kitchen turned up a jar of Welch's grape jelly and plenty of Tang.

You might suppose venison and Tang to be a recipe for disaster. You'd be so very right. This wasn't a run-of-the-mill cooking disaster; it was Chernobyl with more smoke. Pam married me, despite the dinner. Now I hunt, she cooks, and the air is much cleaner for it.

Here's her recipe for venison pot roast, which doesn't call for instant-beverage powder:

2- to 3-pound venison roast
4 tablespoons olive oil
1 medium onion, sliced
½ pound baby carrots
3 parsnips, peeled, sliced lengthwise, and cut into pieces
1 stalk celery, sliced
1 bay leaf
10 whole cloves
¼ teaspoon dried thyme
6 sprigs fresh parsley
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 cup water
2 teaspoons salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oil at medium-high in a Dutch oven or large electric skillet. Brown meat on all sides. Remove and set aside. Lower the heat to medium. In the same pan, sauté onion, carrot, parsnip, and celery until onion is transparent but not browned, about 7 to 10 minutes. Add bay leaf, cloves, thyme, and parsley. Return meat to pot, sprinkle with balsamic vinegar, and add water. Cover and cook at a very low simmer for 2 to 2½ hours, turning once. Remove meat, slice it, and return it to the pan. Add salt and freshly ground pepper to taste. Simmer very gently for 15 minutes. Serve with rice, noodles, or mashed potatoes.

—PHILIP BOURJAILY

TOUGH LUCK

His muzzle is gray. The knobs at the bases of his antlers curl up like wrinkled thumbs, the tines stubbed by age and encrusted with lichen. When you open him up, he smells like all the other deer you ever shot—put together. You've had a spot on the wall waiting for him all these years, but is there a place for him in the kitchen?

Dealing with tough venison from an old buck is an exercise in patience on two fronts. First, patience because one of the better ways to tenderize venison is with slow—very slow—cooking in a liquid base. Second, patience because when you cook venison in liquid, the meat will contract around the fascia, or silver skin. Unless you remove it first, the result will be boot leather, except tougher to chew. Isolating the meat from the connective tissues with the flat side of your knife blade takes a few minutes, but perform this step thoroughly and even the toughest cuts will suffice for the following savory, and very tender, stew, which I like to call Mossyhorn Bourguignonne:

3 pounds venison, cut into 2-inch cubes
½ cup flour
salt and pepper to taste
3 tablespoons olive or vegetable oil
2 tablespoons butter
2 medium onions, quartered
2 cloves garlic, minced
6 carrots, cut in 1-inch sections
20 button mushrooms (or a dozen big ones, halved)
1 teaspoon thyme
1 teaspoon rosemary
2 cups beef broth
1 cup hearty red wine
2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 tablespoons brown sugar

Dust venison with flour, salt, and pepper and brown it in oil in a hot skillet. Remove venison to a big pot or Dutch oven, add herbs, and simmer in wine and beef broth, covered, for 2 hours or until fork tender (it might take twice that long for a Methusalem buck). Sauté the onions, carrots, and garlic and add to the stew; simmer, covered, for another 40 minutes. Brown mushrooms in butter, add to the stew, and simmer, uncovered, for 15 minutes. Stir in the lemon juice and brown sugar and turn off the heat. Serve with green beans and boiled potatoes (you can dump them into the stew for the last half hour if you want, but don't put them in earlier or they will disintegrate).

Note: When in deer camp, try experimenting with ingredients that are on hand. Crush in some leaves from a nearby sagebrush. Turnips add a nice touch; so do cattail roots. In a pinch, bourbon, brandy, or even gin can substitute for the wine.

—KEITH McCAFFERTY

MOST VETERAN CHEFS KNOW WHEN A STEAK HAS REACHED MEDIUM RARE BY TOUCH OR COOKING TIME. A NEW THERMOMETER CAN HELP YOU DO THE SAME; INTERNAL TEMPERATURES OF 110-120 DEGREES WILL PRODUCE EXCELLENT RESULTS.



HE DOESN'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT SITTING ON STAND

FOR FIVE HOURS, BUT CHEF DANIEL BOULUD KNOWS EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT COOKING VENISON. MILES AND MILES FROM YOUR FAVORITE HUNTING GROUND, BOULUD PREPARES ONE OF THE FINEST PLATES OF VENISON YOU'LL FIND IN THE WORLD. BUT HE SAYS YOU DON'T NEED TO COME TO ONE OF HIS NEW YORK RESTAURANTS AND PAY \$82 FOR A MEAL THIS GOOD. YOU HAVE WHAT YOU NEED RIGHT IN YOUR FREEZER—ASSUMING YOU'RE A GOOD SHOT.

"The most important thing about cooking game is not the sort of avant-garde discovery of taste," he says. "It's more about getting back, deep down into the very basic, classical flavor. The key is balance."

Coming from a three-generation family of chefs in a country village near Lyon, France, he has a deep appreciation for working with the land and sharing its rewards with others.

"For me, it's something you can give your friends—an offering you can make," he explains. "It's nice to think when someone shoots a deer: *Who would I like to share this with?*"

Boulud suggests never cooking your venison past medium rare; the key to the best

texture is letting the deer age for at least a week. And a good marinade for preparing the meal will ensure that the meat stays tender and is full of flavor. At his flagship restaurant, Daniel, the chef uses this marinade for his chestnut-crusted venison:

- 2 to 4 pounds venison
- 1 teaspoon grated orange zest
- ½ cup freshly squeezed orange juice
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground star anise
- ¼ teaspoon black peppercorns
- pinch of freshly grated nutmeg
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and crushed
- 1 sprig thyme

ON THE SIDE

Boulud serves his venison loin with a specific side dish: sweet potato puree with fruits and spices. And—dare I say it—this might just compete with your grandmother's sweet-potato pie:

2 pounds sweet potatoes, cut to ½-inch cubes
1 orange (peel and juice)
2 1½-inch cinnamon sticks
1 bay leaf
1 small onion, peeled and studded with 2 cloves garlic
2 tablespoons sweet butter
1 apple, diced to ¼ inch
1 small banana, sliced to ½ inch
2 tablespoons sugar
½ cup heavy cream
salt and pepper to taste

Simmer sweet potatoes along with salt, half of the orange peel, one cinnamon stick, bay leaf, and onion for 20 to 25 minutes. Meanwhile, melt 1 tablespoon of the butter over medium heat and caramelize the apple, banana, and the remaining orange peel and cinnamon stick, about 7 to 10 minutes. Transfer fruit to a plate with a slotted spoon. Add 1 tablespoon sugar to the pan and lightly brown. Slowly add the orange juice and reduce to about 1 tablespoon. Add heavy cream and boil for 3 to 4 minutes. Return fruit to the pan and simmer for 3 to 4 minutes longer. Keep warm. Puree the cooked sweet-potato cubes in a food processor along with fruit from the pan to the desired consistency. Add salt and pepper to taste. Garnish with sugar-sautéed cranberries and sliced orange.—J.O.

Boulud serves farm-raised venison loin in his restaurant but tells me he would not change a thing for wild deer, and he uses this recipe for all cuts, from leg to loin.

Blending the earthy flavors of chestnuts with the meat, he says, adds a rich fall- and winter-harvest accent. Preparation is key: Start with ¼ pound of peeled chestnuts, break into smaller pieces, and spread onto a baking sheet. Age the nuts overnight in a warm place. Pulse into ¼-inch chunks in a food processor; discard smaller pieces and any powder. After marinating your venison for at least 4 hours, pat dry and season with salt and pepper. Beat one large egg in a large bowl. Dust venison with flour; dip it through the egg;

and firmly press the chestnut pieces around the meat, covering thoroughly. Cook in a preheated 425-degree oven to your liking, or until the chestnuts are a deep, golden brown.

And finally, in keeping with his French heritage—always knowing the perfect wine—Boulud urges you to complement the dish with the oldest Rioja wine you can find.—JAMES OWENS

Additional Recipes

For more ways to cook your game than you could try in a lifetime, visit Eileen Clarke's Web site, www.riflesandrecipes.com, where you can order from the best and most complete selection of game cookbooks. And more on Daniel Boulud and his world-famous artistry can be found at www.danielnyc.com; his book, *Cooking with Daniel*, includes a great recipe for roast venison leg.