

The sweet taste of success

A renowned chef reveals the secrets of preparing perfect venison—no matter what the cut.

By Tom Dickson

St. Paul, Minn.—Venison can be one of the most succulent, delectable dishes you set on the holiday table. Prepared correctly, a slice of venison should drip with juice, yield to a butter knife, and taste sweet on the tongue.

So why does so much of it taste like cooked hockey glove?

Ken Goff, executive chef for the Dakota Restaurant in St. Paul, knows the reason. Considered one of the country's top indigenous-food chefs, Goff has been featured in *Gourmet* magazine, in *The New York Times*, and on the Discovery Channel's "Great Chefs" series. An expert on cooking wild game, Goff has learned that different parts of a deer call for different cooking techniques.

"Many cooks don't understand that cooking methods that always apply to certain cuts of venison will almost never apply to others," says Goff. "If you know which cuts to cook using quick, high, dry heat and which to cook in liquid over low heat for a long time, you'll get the best possible flavor from your venison."

Goff brings a passion for wild game, particularly venison, to his kitchen at home and at work. "It's fantastically flavored and much more interesting than commercial meat," he says. Though not a hunter, he prepares venison harvested by friends and regularly serves New Zealand farm-raised venison dishes, such as venison loin with blueberries, to his customers.

Venison basics

In some respects, says Goff, cooks can view venison as they do beef. Both are the dark red meat of large grazing animals. And the cuts of both animals are similar: A sirloin of venison is a steak that comes from the lower back of the animal, as does beef sirloin.

But that's where the deer and the cow part company—and where cooks need to understand the fundamental differences between the two meats. According to Goff, beef can be distinguished from venison primarily by its tasty fat, which is marbled throughout the meat. The fat of venison, on the other hand, tastes like boiled leather when cooked. It is found only outside of the meat and should be trimmed from all cuts. Lacking fat within the meat, uncooked venison has less moisture than beef does.

Though less fat content makes venison easier to dry out when cooking, it also makes a serving of venison leaner than a similar-sized one of beef. Venison has roughly one-half the fat by weight of beef.

More important, in Goff's view, is that venison has "more and better flavor than beef." Heavy with fat, beef has a mild, rich taste. Lacking fat, venison is "tangier and more intense," he says. That sweet tang of deer meat comes from the copious blood, which also gives raw venison steaks their rich, burgundy color. "Dark meat like venison has more capillaries, so there's more blood in the tissue," Goff says. "Blood is sweet. If you accidentally prick your finger and suck it, you can taste that sweetness."

The longer you cook venison, Goff explains, the more bitter it becomes. "That's what people call the 'gamy' taste," he says. "It's the same bitter taste as overdone liver, compared to the sweet taste of liver cooked medium rare."

It's a cook's job, he says, "to keep the venison sweet."

Hot and fast

If the meat in question is one of the tender cuts found on a deer's loin (T-bone, club, rib-eye, sirloin, or porterhouse steaks) or upper rump (rump roast), your job couldn't be simpler: Cook venison at high heat—the quicker the better. “Cook it no more than medium rare,” Goff says. “That way you save the juices, which saves the sweetness.”

Isn't there a risk of getting sick from eating rare meat? Not if the animal was dressed and butchered properly, says Goff. “For a piece of game to be unhealthy, something had to happen to the animal after it died, such as fecal matter getting onto the surface of the meat,” he says. Goff advises hunters to avoid puncturing the intestines when field-dressing deer, because this is where fecal and other contaminants are concentrated. “If you get any contaminants on the meat, wash them off with snow or water as soon as possible,” he says.

Slow and moist

Unfortunately, relatively little of a deer's total weight is composed of tender cuts from the loin. “Most of a deer's bulk is the legs and shoulder,” Goff says. “These are weight-bearing muscles that have a lot of tough ligaments and connective tissue.”

When pan-fried or sautéed, cuts from the shoulder, front legs, and lower back legs stay tough and chewy, which is one reason many hunters turn much of their deer into venison sausage. He says even the densest shoulder roast can be made tender and succulent by slowly cooking it with moist heat.

To break down the strong, connective tissue, tough cuts generally call for cooking a long time (two or more hours) at low temperatures in liquid by either stewing or braising. In stewing the meat is seared briefly at a high heat, then completely submersed in wine, broth, or other liquid. In braising, the meat is only partially submersed.

Although slow-cooking softens the venison tissue, it makes the meat bitter by overcooking the juices. Goff's simple solution is to add something acidic, such as vinegar, tomatoes, or wine, and something sweet, such as onions or fruit, to temper the bitterness that develops during cooking.

Color and sizzle

Goff says that by applying these cooking basics, even beginning cooks can prepare juicy, tender venison dishes no matter what cut they pull from the freezer. By following a few other easy tips, a cook can make a great meal even better.

“I like to add color and beauty to any dish,” he says. “And to do that, you need to buy colorful and beautiful ingredients.”

As Goff prepares venison dishes, he applies a rainbow of condiments such as diced red pepper, chopped chives, cut corn kernels, dried cranberries, and slivered almonds. “I'll add whatever seems right at the time,” he says. “If I've got some big blueberries, I might put those on the side, or with a wild rice side dish I might mix in pepper and corn to give it those nice red and yellow colors.”

Aesthetics also explains why Goff sears venison as a first step to most dishes. Also known as browning, searing—charring the meat surface with high heat—doesn't seal in the juices, as many cooks believe, Goff says. “In fact, if you sear it too long, you'll actually lose moisture by overcooking,” he says. “What searing does is give the exterior that bit of charred taste that we like. It also looks good, and, if something looks good, the eater will be predisposed to enjoy it. Searing also creates a nice aroma and sizzling sound.”

Goff keeps side dishes simple but exciting. Instead of the traditional noodles, for example, he might spoon his venison stroganoff over large, crunchy croutons made of day-old French bread sliced 1-inch thick and fried in butter. “Add some cooked carrots on the side, serve with a little bottle of red wine, and a dish like this would be fancy enough for company food,” he says. “But really it's just glorified peasant cooking.”

Goff recommends laying out all measured ingredients (for example, half-cup finely diced onion) before you begin cooking. “This will allow you to proceed with the recipe at the pace it requires,” he says. He also recommends using heavy pans for sautéing and browning meat and vegetables and cooking at the highest temperature the burner allows. “That means you have to work quickly, but you’ll see it’s worth it,” he says. Goff uses a 50-50 mixture of clarified butter (melted butter minus the milk solids) and canola oil for cooking, but says any light vegetable oil will work.

The three recipes below are for a tender cut, a medium or tough cut, and a tough cut.

Venison with Onions and Balsamic Vinegar

1 to 1 1/2 pounds trimmed loin or rump steak (can be in several pieces)

Salt and pepper

3 tablespoons clarified butter or light cooking oil

1 to 1 1/2 cups thinly sliced red or yellow onion

1/4 cup balsamic vinegar

1/2 cup beef stock or water

4 tablespoons whole, cold butter

1. In a frying pan, heat 2 tablespoons clarified butter or oil over high heat. Meanwhile, lightly season all sides of meat with salt and pepper.
2. Add meat to pan and brown on all sides, 1 to 3 minutes depending on size of pieces. Cook meat in separate batches if necessary to avoid crowding in pan. Remove meat to a cutting board.
3. Add remaining 1 tablespoon clarified butter or oil to pan and sauté onions until nicely browned.
4. Add vinegar and cook until pan is dry. Add stock or water and bring to a boil, stirring to scrape glaze from pan bottom. To this sauce add a pinch of salt and pepper.
5. Add 2 tablespoons cold butter to sauce and whisk in. Remove from heat and whisk in remaining butter.
6. Slice meat thinly (1/6-inch) across the grain. Place slices on plates and pour sauce around. Serve with wild rice and a cooked vegetable, such as carrots. Serves four.

Venison Swiss Steak

1 1/2 to 2 pounds trimmed round or chuck steak (cut into 3/4-inch-thick slices)

Salt and pepper

1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour

3 tablespoons clarified butter or light cooking oil

1 1/2 cups thinly sliced red or yellow onion

2 tablespoons tomato paste or 1 cup tomato puree

1 1/2 cups beef stock or broth

Enough water to cover

1. Preheat oven to 300 F.
2. Mix salt and pepper into flour. Dredge meat in flour to coat well. Shake off excess.

3. At high setting, heat 2 tablespoons clarified butter or oil in a large fry pan or low-sided, flat-bottomed casserole.
4. When the butter or oil is very hot but not smoking, add meat and brown on all sides (roughly 2 minutes). Cook meat in separate batches if necessary to avoid crowding in pan. Remove meat from pan and set aside.
5. Add remaining butter or oil and sauté onions.
6. Stir in tomato paste or puree, stock or broth, and pinch of salt and pepper. Add steaks and position in a single layer. Cover with water.
7. Bring to a boil, cover tightly, and bake in oven for 2 1/2 hours.
8. Remove from oven. Place steaks on plates. Serve with mashed potatoes. Pour sauce from pan over everything. Serves four.

Venison Stroganoff

1 1/2 pounds trimmed chuck, cut into 3/4-inch cubes
Salt and pepper
1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
3 tablespoons clarified butter or light cooking oil
3/4 cup thinly sliced red or yellow onion
1 1/2 cups sliced mushrooms
1 tablespoon tomato paste or 1/2 cup tomato puree
1 1/2 cups beef stock or broth
Enough water to cover
3 tablespoons sour cream
2 tablespoons whole butter
1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley (optional)

Follow steps 1-4 of Venison Swiss Steak recipe.

5. Add remaining butter or oil and sauté onions 1 to 2 minutes until just softened.
6. Stir in mushrooms and cook 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in tomato paste or puree, stock or broth, and pinch of salt and pepper. Add meat. Cover with water.
7. Bring to a boil, cover tightly, and bake in oven for 2 1/2 hours.
8. Remove from oven. Stir in sour cream and whole butter. Serve over egg noodles, mashed potatoes, or homemade croutons. Sprinkle with parsley. Serves four.

Goff's Advice on

Aging meat

Let game hang in cool (33-45 F) temperatures for several days. During aging, says Goff, enzymes break down the cell tissue in the meat, making it more tender. The process is often used to tenderize older deer, which have tougher meat.

“The enzymatic activity also makes the flavor stronger and more complex.” Goff says that less moisture is lost by aging a deer with the skin left on. “If you take the skin off before aging, cover it with several layers of cheesecloth to keep insects off.”

Butchering

Goff recommends that hunters butcher their own deer. “It’s not that hard, and you know you’re getting back the deer you killed and kept clean and not someone else’s.” If you take it to a butcher, he recommends asking for packages to be labeled with the specific cut. “You don’t want packets that just say ‘steak.’ It matters what kind of steak it is. There’s a big difference a chuck steak—which isn’t even really a steak—and a porterhouse steak.”

Trimming

“If it’s white, take it off,” Goff says. He recommends trimming all fat and the thick, white connective tissue called silver skin. The thin, translucent silver skin can stay on the meat.

Cutting

“Cutting across the grain results in more tender venison because the long, strong strands of protein are shortened.”

Bone in vs. bone out

It’s a matter of trade-offs,” Goff says. “The bone gives it more flavor, but it makes for a more unwieldy piece of meat. Many people think venison already has enough flavor without the bone. It’s up to the individual.”

Venison Basics

Tough cuts

From the neck and from the shoulder of deer older than 3 years: neck roast and chuck roast. Cooking: These cuts are best cooked slowly in moist heat, by browning first, then braising or stewing with the addition of sweetness and acidity to balance the bitterness.

Medium cuts

From the lower rump and upper back leg (the round) and from the shoulder of deer younger than 3 years: round steaks and roasts. Cooking: These can be cooked quickly at high heat if tenderized by pounding thin to break down the tough tissue or if sliced thin after cooking. Otherwise, they are best braised or stewed.

Tender cuts

From the backstrap: T-bone, club, rib-eye, sirloin, porterhouse, tenderloin. From the upper rump: rump roast. Cooking: To get the most flavor from these cuts and keep them tender, cook them rare to medium rare by pan frying or sautéing briefly over high heat.

Trimming

Small pieces left over after butchering and trimming fat and silver skin. Cooking: Trimmings from the tender and medium cuts can be sautéed and made into stir fry. Trimmings from tough cuts work best in stews. Trimmings from the shanks and between the ribs can be made into sausage when combined with an equal portion of pork fat or pork shoulder and spices, such as sage (breakfast sausage) or anise (Italian sausage).

(Tom Dickson is the staff writer for the DNR Division of Fish and Wildlife, St. Paul. Reprinted from the Minnesota Conservation Volunteer and the DNR Web site.)

Prayer to a deer slain by a hunter

I had need,
I have dispossessed you of beauty, grace, and life.
I have sundered your spirit from its wordly fame.
No more will you run in freedom
Because of my need.

I had need.
You have in life served your kind in goodness.
By your life, I will serve my brothers.
Without you I hunger and grow weak.
Without you I am helpless, nothing.

I had need.
Give me your flesh for strength.
Give me your casement for protection.
Give me your bones for my labours,
And I shall not want.

—*Excerpted from Ojibway Heritage, by Basil Johnston*