



Do-it-yourself Venison

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Ahh venison . . .

At the prospect of a nice thick deer steak, some wrinkle their nose, and some drift off into near religious ecstasy. Why the

difference?

“Gamy” is the complaint you normally hear from the nose wrinklers. But the word covers an enormous range of problems.

True, some animals develop unpleasant flavors during the rut (mating season). And diet can play a huge factor in the flavor - deer in corn and soybean country usually taste better than deer that don't have access to agricultural snacks.

Even the processing method can cause problems. A butchers band saw can deposit unpleasant flavored bone dust.

Venison fat tends to have an unpleasant waxy texture that coats your mouth, and often has an unpleasant taste. I trim and toss most of it before cooking or grinding (saving the suet for bird feeding). For a more detailed (and possibly more enlightened) view on deer fat, see [Demystifying Deer Fat](#) by Hank Shaw of Hunter•Angler•Gardener•Cook.

I stand firm in the opinion that the most common cause of disappointment at the plate is poor care of the meat between the field and the freezer. The moment the animal hits the ground, if you care about meat quality you've started a race in time against an enemy that doesn't take breaks. Any beef would taste nasty if was treated the way many hunters and even some commercial deer processors treat venison.

Years ago I'd had enough of paying good money to processors who cut corners and take no pride in their work. I've only used one processor who I felt did a proper job, and he went out of business because he had to charge more since doing it right costs more. People wouldn't pay it.

So I bought videos on deer processing and taught myself. You can do the same.

The first deer I cut up was an adventure. It took me forever. Us amateur butchers are never going to be as fast as the pros. But over time it gets easier and faster.

If you're the type that cares well for your venison in the field and the kitchen, why not give this a try? It doesn't take much more than a sharp knife to do the job. Most of us who have never done such a thing assume it is a job for professionals, or requires expensive tools. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

There are many tricks and tips in this article, aimed specifically at saving you time. Trust me, the satisfaction of cutting up your own deer fades if it takes you all day.

I've probably cut up 3 or 4 dozen or so since I started doing my own. I've never had one that tasted bad, including mature adult bucks taken in the peak of the rut. Some were tough, but none gamy. To be honest, deer taken in farm country generally taste better than deer that have to scratch out a living far from agriculture.

There are excellent deer processing instructional videos out there. Google, Amazon, Ebay, are all good sources, just search for "deer processing". I recommend buying 2 or 3 dvd's, studying them carefully, Then try them out next time you get the chance. Shop carefully though -- there is a wide range of quality. The one I like best is "[Cutting Deer Right](#)" from Heid Wild Game. His knifework is so fast it is hard to follow sometimes, but his method is the best I've ever seen.

There are also plenty of YouTube videos, but you may have to sort through some junk to get to the gems.

Here are a few of my own tips:

When it comes to good meat, once you've put the deer on the ground you still have one remaining worthy adversary: bacteria.

Getting the carcass dressed and cooled and kept clean is an immediate and urgent task. Bacteria do not wait a few hours for you to relax and celebrate.

Leave the tarsal glands on the deer (the dark smelly ones inside the hock). Avoid touching them altogether.

Consider dressing methods that don't involve splitting the pelvis. Tools such as the "[Butt Out](#)" and "[The Rectifier](#)" make this more practical. That keeps more meat protected

until it's time to cut it up.

If insects are a problem in the field, be prepared by bringing a game bag. Dusting exposed meat with fine ground black pepper also helps.

When it's warm out, place an ice bag or two in the cavity as soon as possible, and put one between the hams, which should still be completely covered by hide. Use string or bungee cord or whatever to hold the icebag in place.

If transporting in a vehicle, cradle the whole mess in a tarp to keep cool air in and stop the melting ice and other fluids from soiling your vehicle. Skip that step and you might be reminded of your deer every time you drive, especially when it's warm out. DAMHIK.

If the intestines were disturbed by the shot or the field dressing rinse the cavity well ASAP. Then consider swabbing the cavity with a 3 to 1 water/vinegar mixture. Depending on how long the internal surface was in contact with intestinal fluids, and which fluids these were, you may need to discard the ribs, flank and (sob) possibly even the tenders. This only in extreme cases however.

If the tenderloins are covered by fat, leave it on. If not, remove rinse & bag them as soon as possible. Do not allow them to dry or get soiled by debris.

If the deer will be mounted, don't cut below the sternum or your taxidermist will cuss you and charge you more. Otherwise, cut all the way down to the head, removing the esophagus/trachea from the neck. There are a lot of bacteria in them and they can taint the neck meat, which is otherwise marvelous for stew or grinding. Some even like it tied into a roast.

While you're working in that area it can also be a good time to retrieve the tongue, another interesting piece of meat.

Be sure the meat is well chilled while you work with it. The firmer it is the easier your job will be, especially trimming.

If you are into bird feeding and happen to have a deer with thick sheets of hard fat on it's rump (common in corn country) save and freeze that fat for use in suet feeders. The birds go nuts over it.

As a general rule of thumb, don't cut steaks. Instead, cut meal-sized roasts. That way you can wait until you are ready to use it before deciding whether to cut it into steaks or

use it as a roast, or as [jerky](#). This also reduces freezer burn, saves cutting and wrapping time, and makes it easier to keep your freezer organized. Once it's sliced you can't go back.

Still, if you have a vacuum sealer or good wrapping technique and KNOW you plan to cook them as steaks and not roasts, you may prefer to go ahead and cut the steaks on butcher day. They will freeze faster as steaks than as roasts, though the importance of good wrapping goes way up. It all boils down to when you want to spend that time.

As an alternative to freezing stew meat, consider canning. It's an excellent use for tougher cuts. This saves freezer space, and is delicious in stews, chili, bbq sandwiches, etc. Use the same process as canning beef, for which any canning reference will include directions.

Absolutely never try canning using any process other than [those approved by the USDA](#). It's quite safe if you follow the instructions, potentially dangerous if you do not. **ABSOLUTELY NEVER USE A WATER BATH CANNING METHOD** with meat or any other low-acid food. Pressure canning only.

There are some truly excellent YouTube videos out there to show you how to can meat - but some of them take shortcuts. Heed the USDA directions in the link above wherever there is a difference of opinion with a YouTuber.

Another excellent use for roasts is to make "corned" venison. [Here's a great recipe](#).

On final trim of round roasts or backstraps that are headed for the freezer, leave the external 'silver skin' on. It saves you time on processing day but also protects from freezer burn and is easily trimmed when thawed prior to cooking.

Trimming out the shoulders is a time consuming process, leaving you with chunks that are small, oddly shaped, and usually tough. Braising is the answer. A whole [braised shoulder](#) is a remarkable piece of venison, and keeping it whole saves you processing time. There are some challenges to wrapping it well enough to prevent freezer burn, but it's worth it.

Shanks, both front and rear, are also excellent for braising. They are too tough and full of connective tissues for other methods. You could just grind them, but you may need to unclog your grinder after you run them through. Keeping your grinder blade sharp helps.

Any processing video will show you wrapping techniques, so I won't go into great detail

except to say that a vacuum sealer can make a huge difference in preventing freezer burn. But be warned, the least expensive models are usually not up to the task of doing a big job. After a few cycles they get hot and need to cool down for several minutes between uses -- a bummer when you have several bags of venison waiting. Spring for a heavy duty model.

[Another key to keeping your meat fresh and wholesome as long as possible](#), store it in a true freezer, not the freezer compartment of your kitchen fridge/freezer combo. And turn that freezer down as low as it will go. Meat frozen below 0F remains good much longer than it would stored at 10F, which is probably near where your kitchen freezer compartment hovers.

Many folks add pork or beef fat to ground venison. I don't. Why add all those calories to this great wild meat? Ground venison will hold together well in burgers or meatloaf with the addition some instant potato flakes. Also, I have had excellent results using a fat substitute, "RP Lean", from TheSausageMaker.com.. You may want to get their catalog as well.

Ensure the meat freezes as rapidly as possible. A quick freeze preserves flavor and moisture. Put wrapped packages into the coldest possible freezer and separate them to maintain air circulation until well frozen. Do not stack or pile raw packages. It would be better to divide your "load" into groups, and put it in the freezer in waves every couple of hours, staging in the refrigerator.

Do it yourself venison. Bon appetit!

-end -

ADDENDUM:

Here is a description of what happens to one of my deer. These steps are performed quickly, before celebration and a bragging session around a campfire.

The steps between the time the deer hits the ground, and the meat is all processed, wrapped and stored will be different for all of us, depending on where we are, what resources we have.

The weather somewhat dictates the urgency, but there is no weather in which it is ok to leave a dead deer lay without at least being dressed and preferably hung. Sometimes it may be necessary to wait before taking up the trail. But if I am sure it's down, I immediately get started taking care of that carcass.

First I locate and tag the deer, then fetch the ATV for transport back to the meat pole.

Then I use a [Hunters Specialties "Butt Out" tool](#) to remove and tie off the lower colon. This is not a product placement ad, it's just what I use. I haven't used ["The Rectifier"](#) but hear it does the job also.

I hang the deer head down, over a plastic bin. Then I dress it, letting the innards fall naturally into the bin, where I can easily remove the heart and liver. I don't eat them but my wife loves them. The rest is later taken to a dumping spot and the bin gets rinsed out for next time.

Dressing a hanging deer is faster, easier and cleaner than trying to do it on the ground. But if there is any reason I can't get the deer to the meat pole quickly, I'll go ahead and dress it in the field.

At this point the weather determines if the deer should hang and cool naturally, if I need to pack the cavity with bags of ice, or if I need to get it into the cooler.

Sometimes I'll put it in the cooler if the weather is TOO cold. I've skinned a frozen deer before. Once. A nightmare I intend never to repeat.

My "camp cooler" is actually the largest chest freezer I could buy, adapted with a custom thermostat on the power side, to hold the temp where I want, usually about 34F. The freezer is mounted on a trailer parked near my cabin and powered via extension cord. I tow the trailer under the meat pole and lower the deer into the cooler. With a proper winch or pulley it's an easy one man job.

Bob the front legs at the knee and the hind legs below the hock to allow the deer to fit more easily. Depending on the deer, we can usually fit three. So long as my wife hasn't killed one of those stupid huge bucks that try to wander past her every couple of years.

Sure, a chest freezer is expensive. But how much are you paying per deer to have someone else do the job? It doesn't take many of them to pay for that freezer. And if you get to deer camp during a warm spell, you can just go ahead and hunt without worrying about ruined meat. And, after the hunting season, you have an extra freezer around to store your meat!

One way or another, the deer go into the cooler for the ride home, where I pull the trailer into my unheated detached garage, plug the cooler back in, and process the deer at my

convenience within the next couple of days.

When it is time to process, I hang and skin them. Then I begin the process of disassembly, using a meat lug to carry the shoulders, hindquarters, loins, etc. to my kitchen for final cutting and wrapping.

I put the meat lug in the fridge and take out one piece at a time for trimming, cutting and wrapping. It is much easier to work with well chilled meat, not to mention it keeps the bacteria from waking up and crashing the party. Two or three people working on this step makes light work. **Keep your hands and tools and handling surfaces clean and disinfected.** Don't cut corners here.

Some general philosophies I have evolved:

Trimming is the art of separating all the good meat you will wrap up in a package marked "steak" or "Roast" from everything else. It involves a lot of time spent removing fat, gristle, and fascia (a.k.a. silverskin) while trying not to waste any meat.

If you get too fussy trimming can make the whole process really time consuming. It takes some practice to get good at it and learn what is "good enough" for you.

There will be lots of trim. After discarding anything bloodshot or contaminated in any way, and all the stuff that is not meat, I separate it into 3 categories:

- **Stew or canning**: Anything that cuts into nice chunks without needing detailed trimming.
- **Grind**: Anything left that doesn't need a lot of trimming. Too much fascia can clog up the grinder.
- **Stock pot meat**: All remaining pieces. Fascia, fat and gristle are fine in stock meat. Keeping that fact in mind can save you lots of time. Shanks and the meat cut from between the rib bones are [excellent stock](#) meat, so long as there is nothing bloodshot or contaminated.

Usually I'll put them into 1 or 2lb quantities and freeze them. I save grinding till after the season, in preparation for making sausage some snowy weekend.

Save major leg bones, shoulder bones and rib bones for [stock](#). Take the same care of them you do the meat - they spoil just as quickly.

