

# Do-it-yourself Venison

By [Steve Jones](#)



Ahh venison . . . When offered a nice thick deer steak, some wrinkle their nose but others 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 can develop unpleasant flavors during the rut (mating season). And diet can play a huge factor in flavor. Deer in corn and soybean country often taste better than deer that don't have access to agricultural snacks.

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

Venison fat has an unpleasant waxy texture that coats your mouth, and some ::cough:: me ::cough:: don't appreciate the flavor. 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.

But I believe the most common cause of disappointment at the plate is poor care somewhere between the field and the freezer. Even store-bought meat would taste nasty if 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. So I bought VHS tapes on deer processing and taught myself (yeah, it was a while ago).

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

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. It doesn't take much more than a sharp knife.

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'd guess I've processed well over 50 deer since I started about 25 years ago. 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.

There are excellent deer processing instructional videos out there. Google, Amazon, and Ebay are all good sources. I recommend getting 2 or 3 and comparing tips and techniques. There is always more to learn. Shop carefully though -- there is a wide range of quality. My current favorite is "[Cutting Deer Right](#)" from Heid Wild Game. His knife work is so fast it is hard to follow, but his method is the best I've seen.

There are also plenty of YouTube videos (free!) but you will have to sort through some junk to find the gems.

I find it helpful to spend a few minutes reviewing video to refresh my memory before tackling the first deer every fall.

Here are a few of my own observations and tips:

The moment the beast hits the ground you're in a race in time against an enemy that doesn't take breaks — bacteria. Getting the carcass quickly dressed, cooled, and kept clean is vital. This can be challenging under field conditions.

Weather determines the urgency of taking steps to get and keep the carcass chilled, but there is no weather in which it is ok to leave a deer lay without at least being dressed. 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. I prefer to leave the skin on to keep the meat clean, but there are certainly situations in which you need to get the skin off right away to speed cooling.

I've heard all manner of advice about how to deal with the tarsal glands of cervids (deer, elk, moose) which are particularly dark, oily and smelly on a rutting buck or bull. I'm not going to say my advice is the best, but I just avoid touching them altogether — and make sure that anything that does touch them doesn't touch anything else.

Once I get to them at the skinning step I carefully peel them off with the knife touching only the raw side of the hide, peeling back while wearing disposable gloves, which I discard immediately afterwards.

Most folks split the pelvis. I prefer to leave it intact. I use a Hunters Specialties "[Butt](#)

[Out](#)" to remove and tie-off the lower colon. Then , using a sharp, slender blade (I like a short fish fillet knife for this) I detach the anus and surrounding tissue back a few inches. The whole thing will be pulled into the cavity and discarded with the rest of the entrails. Leaving the pelvis intact keeps more of those prime leg roasts protected until it's time to cut them up.

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 well covered by fat, you can leave them in place for now. If not, remove and cool them as soon as possible. They are small — avoid anything that may lead to more trimming later. Do not allow them to dry or get soiled by debris.

If the deer will be mounted, don't cut above the sternum or your taxidermist will cuss you and charge you more. Otherwise, cut all the way up 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, braising or grinding. Some even like it rolled and tied into a roast.

While you're working in that area it is a good time to retrieve the tongue, another interesting piece of meat — though a bit small on deer. Moose and elk are another story.

Once all the field work is done, take great pains to keep the carcass clean and cold. Get it to the cutting table in the best condition you can. If the weather is too warm 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 everything in place. If you're transporting deer that way, either use someone else's vehicle or be sure it's all well contained by a tarp. DAMHIK.

When you are ready to butcher, remain focused on keeping the meat cold. Also be sure that your tools, and any surfaces you touch are clean - including your hands. You're preparing ingredients for many, many meals and shortcuts can have big repercussions.

Of course be sure the meat is well chilled before, during and after butchering. Aside from the bacterial question, well chilled meat is firm. Trimming is frustrating and time consuming when the meat isn't firm.

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

When cutting steaks, consider an alternative. If you just trim up your roasts and cutting them into meal sizes instead of into steaks you have the option of waiting before deciding whether to cut it into steaks. This reduces freezer burn, saves cutting and wrapping time on processing day, gives you extra options, and makes it easier to keep your freezer organized.

As an alternative to freezing stew meat, consider pressure 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 pressure canning beef, for which any canning reference will include directions.

If pressure canning, precisely follow processes [approved by the USDA](#). It's quite safe if you follow the instructions — potentially dangerous if you do not. NEVER use the "water bath" canning method with meat or any other low-acid food. Pressure canning only.

Aggressively trim any shot-up parts and discard. This is doubly important if you use lead ammo and your meat may be consumed by children or potentially pregnant women. Recent research has shown there can be significant quantities of lead even beyond the obvious perimeter of a wound channel. There is no safe level of lead consumption established for children or pregnant women. On the positive side, I've learned that top quality copper ammo performs as well if not better than lead.

On final trim of round roasts or backstraps headed for the freezer, consider leaving the external 'silver skin' on. It saves time on processing day and protects from freezer burn. It is easily trimmed after you thaw it out to cook.

Trimming out shoulders is a time consuming process, leaving you with chunks that are small, oddly shaped, and usually tough. Braising is perfect for these cuts, but most folks just grind them or cut them into stew meat.

A whole bone-in [braised shoulder](#) is a remarkable piece of venison, and keeping it whole saves you processing time. There are some challenges to wrapping a whole shoulder well enough to prevent freezer burn, but it's worth it.

I grind very little of my deer, keeping the muscles as whole and large as I can to preserve my options. Just like you can't un-slice a steak, you can't un-grind burger.

Shanks, both front and rear, are also excellent for braising. As is the "heel", the muscle right above the hind shanks, connected to the top of the achilles tendon. They are all too tough and full of connective tissues for many other methods.

Most processing videos will show you good 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 cheaper external bag type sealers 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 bags -- a bummer when you have several bags of venison waiting. Spring for a heavy duty model. If you are using freezer paper instead of vacuum bags, use plastic wrap as your first layer. It really helps prevent freezer burn.

Trimming is the art of separating everything you will wrap up in a package marked "steak" or "Roast" from everything else. Removing fat, gristle, and fascia (a.k.a. silverskin), and of course any damaged or bloodshot parts, while trying not to waste any good wholesome meat.

How you approach trimming is likely the number one factor in how long processing a deer will take you. Fussy trimming can really eat up time. It takes practice to get good at it and learn what is "good enough" for you.

There will be lots of trim, which I separate into 4 categories:

- **Trash**: Anything that is dirty, bloodshot, bruised, dried, or looks in any way unwholesome. In other words, anything that doesn't deserve a place of honor in one of the next three categories:
- **Stew or canning**: Anything that cuts into nice chunks without needing more trimming. A nice thing about packages of stew meat is that they can stand in as grind if you need them to.
- **Grind**: Anything left that doesn't need a lot of trimming.
- **Stock pot meat**: All remaining clean pieces. Silverskin and gristle are great for stock meat. Keeping that fact in mind can save you lots of time. The meat cut from between the rib bones is [excellent stock](#) meat, so long as there is nothing bloodshot, bruised or contaminated. If you don't make stock, start. It's a true gem. You'll also need to save the bones for that. Joints and marrow bones are best. Keep them clean and treat them well. They spoil as quickly as meat, and rather spectacularly.

Usually I'll put each category into 2 lb quantities and freeze them. Sometimes I put

grind into 5lb bags to thaw and grind for a sausage making weekend.

[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. If you can scoop ice cream without cussing, your freezer is way too warm for long term meat storage.

Ensure the meat freezes as rapidly as possible. A quick freeze preserves flavor and moisture. Separate the wrapped packages to maintain air circulation around each 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.

**IMPORTANT:** If processing any cervid (deer, elk, moose), unless you are 100% positive this animal was taken in an area of the country in which Chronic Wasting Disease has never been detected, discard everything but the wrapped packages in the household trash or some other method destined for a real landfill. Everything. Bones, hide, trim, anything that you aren't saving to eat. Don't give the bones to your dog. Don't toss anything "out back" for the raccoons or coyotes. Same thing if you're going through the freezer to discard things that got too old. Poor carcass control is one of the top causes of the spread of CWD.

You may have noticed I say nothing about aging. That is not an accident. Arguments pro and con and how are conducted with religious fervor. If you are curious — google is your friend. I have no opinion except to say that so far I am satisfied with how non-aged venison performs on my plate.

Doing it yourself is incredibly satisfying. Knowing what you, your friends and family are eating has been under your control from the shot to the plate is a special feeling. Bon appetit!