



Do-it-yourself Venison

By Steve Jones

Ahh venison. The notion of eating this magnificent wild meat has some elbowing their way to the table, while others may wrinkle their nose and turn away. Why the difference?

“Gamey” is the complaint you normally hear from the nose wrinklers. But the word covers a huge range of problems - many preventable.

True, in some situations animals develop unpleasant flavors during the rut (mating season). And diet can play a huge factor in flavor.

Few folks enjoy venison fat. Though it has almost no intramuscular fat (marbling), there is intermuscular fat under the skin and between muscle groups - sometimes a lot in deer from areas with row crops. It tends to have an unpleasant waxy texture that coats your mouth, and the flavor is not great.

But I believe that by far the most common "gamey" culprit is poor care somewhere between the trigger and the freezer. Beef would taste bad too if treated the way many of us hunters and even some commercial deer processors treat venison.

I killed my first deer in 1987. By 1990 I had enough of being disappointed in what I brought home from the processor. So I bought videos on deer processing.

I've processed 2 or 3 deer most years since then. I've never had a single one that tasted bad, including mature adult bucks taken in the peak of the rut. Some were tough, but none gamey. And I never "soak" them in anything, or do anything to mask their great natural flavor.

The first deer I cut up was an adventure. It took me forever. We amateurs will never be as fast as the pros — but over time it gets easier and faster.

Many hunters assume it is too hard, or requires expensive tools. Nope - it doesn't take much more than a sharp knife. And the money you save will more than pay for whatever tools you don't already have.

There are many tricks and tips here aimed specifically at saving you time. The satisfaction of cutting up your own deer fades a bit when it takes you all day.

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 sometimes hard to follow, but his method is the best I've seen.

There are also plenty of YouTube videos (free!) but you may need to wade through some junk to find the gems. I find it helpful to spend a few minutes reviewing videos to refresh my memory before tackling the first deer I cut up each year.

Here are a few of my own observations and tips:

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

Weather determines the urgency of taking steps to chill the carcass, but there is no weather in which it is ok to leave it lay without at least being dressed. Sometimes you have to wait before taking up the trail. But if you are sure it's down, get started taking care of that carcass right away. It all starts with preparation, before the hunt.

I prefer to leave the skin on until just before processing to keep the meat clean — but in some situations it's best to get the skin off right away to speed cooling. That presents cleanliness challenges you'll need to handle.

I've heard all manner of advice about how to deal with the tarsal glands, which are the dark, smelly patches on the inside hind legs. They are extra stinky on a rutting buck or bull. I'm not going to say my advice is the best or that any other is wrong, but I avoid touching them altogether in the field. And I make sure that anything that does touch them doesn't touch anything else.

When it's time to skin the deer, once I get near the tarsals 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.

To keep the hams covered as well as possible I do not split the pelvis. I use a Hunters Specialties "[Butt Out](#)" to remove and tie-off the lower colon with string or a small zip tie. 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. While you're in that neighborhood,

deal cautiously with the bladder. Try to remove it without incident.

If the stomach or intestines were disturbed, rinse the cavity well ASAP after field dressing. Then consider spraying or swabbing the cavity with an antimicrobial carcass spray (google will help you find it) or 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 — but only in extreme cases.

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. The key is to avoid letting the surface get dry or contaminated. Unless well protected by fat I cut them out and package them in camp. They are small, but they are the best meat on the deer.

Unless your deer will be mounted, cut all the way up to the head, removing the esophagus and trachea. There are a lot of bacteria in them and they can taint the neck meat, which is otherwise marvelous for stew, braising, grinding, or even tied into a roast.

While 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 the field work is done, keep the carcass clean and get it cold. If the weather is warm depending on what resources you have available you may need to devote some effort to this. If the weather is not cooperative a helpful shortcut is to place a couple of ice bags in the cavity, and one between the hams. Use string or bungee cord or whatever to hold everything in place, and keep it in the shade. A tarp may be needed to keep dust and bugs out and help keep cooler air next to the carcass.

When it's time to butcher, be sure your tools and any surfaces you touch start and remain clean — including your hands. Lackadaisical cleanliness is unforgivable when preparing quantities of food for long term storage. Shortcuts can have big consequences.

Be sure the meat is well chilled before, during and after butchering. Aside from the bacterial issue, chilled meat is firm. Trimming is frustrating and time consuming when the meat isn't firm. If not working in the cold, have your trim bowls sitting inside a bowl lined with ice, or frequently move their contents to the fridge.

Even if you prefer steaks/chops over roasts, consider wrapping and freezing your roasts whole, postponing final trim and cutting until after thawed for use. This makes processing day easier, simplifies freezer organization, and is an excellent way to battle freezer burn. Win, win.

For instance I like to cut loins into 9" sections and freeze them leaving the silver skin on. On cooking day that lets me trim the silverskin, cut into three 3" sections I butterfly into three beautiful freshly cut 1.5" [loin chops](#).

An alternative to freezing stew meat is pressure canning - an excellent use for tough cuts like shanks and heels. It saves freezer space and is delicious in stews, chili, bbq sandwiches, etc. Use the same process as pressure canning beef. Follow processes [approved by the USDA](#). It's safe if you follow the instructions — potentially dangerous if you do not. NEVER use the "water bath" method when canning meat (or any low-acid food).

Aggressively trim and discard any shot-up parts. This is doubly important if you use lead ammo. Research has shown there can be lead even beyond the obvious perimeter of a wound channel. There is no safe level of lead consumption established for children or pregnant women. I've found that top quality copper ammo performs very well — maybe even better than lead.

There is great meat on the shoulder, but it presents challenges. It's the area most likely to sustain shot damage, and the muscles are nestled among complex bone shapes. Trimming out whole shoulder cuts is time consuming and results in pieces that are relatively small, oddly shaped, and can be tough. I can't argue with those who like them for roasts or small steaks, but I prefer to use them for stew meat or grind.

If you encounter a whole shoulder without much damage, a whole bone-in [braised shoulder](#) is a beautiful thing. Think "pulled venison". Keeping it whole saves you processing time, though properly wrapping for the freezer can be a challenge. And a whole shoulder from a large deer probably won't fit in a braising pan. Separating the shank/bone from the main shoulder should help make everything fit.

Shanks, both front and rear, are also spectacular when braised. As is the "heel" - the muscle right above the hind shank, connected to the top of the achilles tendon. They are tough and full of connective tissue, but have great flavor that really comes out in a braise. They are also fine for grinding.

Consider not grinding on processing day — instead freezing everything you plan to grind in conveniently sized packages. That lets you thaw batches and grind "to order", adding whatever fat is called for, and choosing the appropriate grinding plate for your intended use. It also lets you get away with a smaller, less expensive grinder than you might prefer to do a big job all at once.

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 most inexpensive external bag type

sealers are often 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 use freezer paper instead of a vacuum sealer, use plastic wrap tight against the meat as your first layer. It really helps prevent freezer burn.

Trimming is the art of separating everything you will package from everything else. In other words, removing fat, gristle, glands, fascia (a.k.a. silverskin), and of course any damaged or bloodshot parts, while trying not to waste any wholesome meat.

How you approach trimming is the #1 factor in how long processing a deer will take you. Detailed trimming really eats up time. It takes practice to get good at it and learn what is "good enough" for you. Bottom line, final trimming on a single package you just thawed out for a meal is not oppressive. That same trimming for 20 packages you are about to freeze IS oppressive.

On the other hand, it's much easier to trim larger pieces than small - so if you plan to package steaks do the final trimming on the roast before cutting the steaks.

There will be plenty of trim, which I place into 4 categories:

- **Trash:** Anything that is dirty, bloodshot, bruised, dried, or appears in any way unwholesome. In other words, anything that doesn't deserve a place of honor in one of the next three categories. I include fat in this category. You might not.
- **Stew or canning:** Anything that cuts into eating size chunks without needing more trimming. A nice thing about packages of stew meat is that they can also be used as grind if needed.
- **Grind:** Anything left that doesn't need a lot of trimming.
- **Stock pot meat:** All remaining clean pieces. Silverskin and gristle are fine for stock meat. Keeping that fact in mind can save you lots of time. If you don't save ribs, the meat cut from between the rib bones is [excellent stock](#) meat, though it can also be used for grind.

Usually I package each category into 2 lb quantities for the freezer. Sometimes I put grind into 5lb bags to thaw and grind for a sausage making weekend.

Another category is bones - which you save to [make stock](#). If you don't make stock, you really should start. Joints and marrow bones are best. Keep them clean and wrap/freeze them well. They spoil as quickly as meat, and rather spectacularly.

[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. And turn that freezer down as low as it will go. If you can scoop ice cream without cussing, your freezer is too warm for long term meat storage.

Ensure that the meat freezes as rapidly as possible. The quicker the freeze, the better flavor and moisture are preserved. 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. Once it's well frozen you can stack it however you like.

You may have noticed I did not mention aging. That is not an accident. Discussions ~~Arguments~~ about the topic are conducted with religious fervor. If you are curious — google is your friend. I've never tried it and have no opinion except to say that I am very happy with how non-aged venison performs on my plate. I would not hesitate to try aging venison if I was interested — but I'd take great care to do it safely.

I have pretty much the same opinion with soaking the meat in various liquids to "get the gamey taste out" or whatever. Never saw the need.

VERY IMPORTANT note regarding CWD (Chronic Wasting Disease):

When processing any cervid (deer, elk, moose), discard EVERYTHING that didn't go into your freezer so that it winds up in a real commercial landfill. Everything. Bones, hide, trim, anything that you aren't going to eat or take to the taxidermist.

No scraps or bones for pets. Don't discard anything on the landscape. Prions, the infectious agent for CWD, are incredibly persistent and remain viable in soil (even if they already passed through a dog or a coyote) for decades. Improper carcass disposal by hunters is a top cause of new CWD outbreaks. DON'T DO IT!

Cutting up your own deer is very satisfying. Knowing that 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!

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