



BACKSTRAP

VENISON

& BEYOND



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Photographed by Melissa McGaw

MOLASSES-BAKED
VENISON HAM

TIRED OF THE SAME OLD DEER DISHES?

Here are some variations on the old and a few new twists to try.



MOLASSES-BAKED
VENISON HAM INGREDIENTS

Many years ago, I had the opportunity to host three Cherokee Indians on a deer hunt. It turned out to be one of my best remembered, and most valuable, experiences as a younger, and pretty much still-learning-the-basics hunter.

They had come to Salisbury at the invitation of Vance Eller, my father-in-law, who, along with his wife, Charlotte, were involved with the tribe for many years in many ways, providing much support for a childrens library on the reservation, among other things.

We hunted a small piece of private land—about 100 acres—and by late morning each of the three guests had killed a doe. That’s when things got interesting.

I suggested we load the deer into my truck and take them to a cleaning station where winches and gambrels, knives, saws, bone cutters and other various tools we used to skin and butcher deer were available.

The Cherokees were appreciative for the offer of facilities, but they had to get on the road and it was a long drive back up to their mountain home: they would take care of business then and there if that was OK. “Fine by me,” I said. “I’ve got a few tools in the truck you can use,” thinking they might at least want to have a small saw, a hatchet for rib-work, and other such things that I and my hunting acquaintances used on a regular basis.

THREE DEER, THREE POCKET KNIVES

Again, they were polite, but one of the men, reaching into his pocket, said they had everything they needed.

He produced a folding knife with one blade, about five inches long, along with a much-used whetstone and they spread the three deer on a clear, grassy piece of ground. The other men produced similar blades and they set to work, stopping only to hone their blades now and then.

As I recall, it wasn’t much more than an hour later and they were ready to head home. After asking permission, they left behind, spread around on the ground, the heads (minus the tongues) and entrails—“for the other animals and the birds,” they explained.

In addition to the meat, including the livers and hearts, which were prized above the other cuts, went the skins, hooves, tails, ribs, everything but the smell. Nothing was wasted. What little they couldn’t use, they left for something else that would. I’ve always thought that the animals and birds caught a break that day: if the men had gotten bucks rather than does the heads and antlers would have gone back to Cherokee too.

I never saw those men again, but I think of them often when we clean deer at our Bertie County hunting camp. Our skinning pole with two winches, the stainless steel table salvaged from a long-gone restaurant we use for cleaning and butchering, and all the knives, saws, bone cutters, butt-pullers and other assorted tools we use makes me think of our long-ago guests and their pocket knives. What would they think of our set-up for accomplishing what they did on the ground with single blades?

The take-away for me, though, was not how they went about their work so much as how they looked at their kill. They never said anything. They didn’t preach. They didn’t make a big deal of it, but they didn’t waste anything—nothing! It was their way.

Since that time, I’ve tried heart, liver, and most other parts of a deer. But no tongue yet—maybe next season. Maybe not.

But more times than not, many hunters I’ve been around wind up keeping only the “choice” cuts. I’ve never seen anyone turn down hams or backstraps (loins). But, for whatever reason, that is sometimes about all hunters are willing to go to the trouble of keeping when skinning a deer—just the “good” cuts.

WHICH ARE THE “BAD” CUTS?

During recent years, I have come to the conclusion, or maybe revelation, that there are really no “bad” cuts of venison. Some may be more politically correct than others, but there are few parts of a deer that can’t be turned into a tasty dish.

And speaking of taste, what does “gamey” mean? Venison is wild game and it tastes like game the same way domestic beef or pork or fowl tastes like what they are. Any cut of any animal,

wild or domestic, that isn't handled properly from the field, or the slaughterhouse, to the table, is going to taste "gamey" or worse. All animals have their textures and flavors, thank goodness.

As for preparation, there will always be grinding for burger and sausage. And the grill will always be fired up for backstraps. But baking, roasting, stewing, braising, sautéing and even corning and frying venison, and, in some fashion, using other cuts that are a little more trouble to bring home, but excellent fare, can add variety to the menu while making use of pretty much the whole animal.

Depending on how a deer is skinned, the tenderloins may stay inside the body cavity. If you're going to open up the deer in a way that you have access to them, they should be removed as soon as possible so the deer's body heat doesn't cause them to spoil. Granted, they are small, but those two strips are prime eating and a shame to waste.

Shoulders of course, can produce small roasts or excellent meat for grinding into burger. A neck roast, another piece often left on the carcass, is fine when prepared properly—tender and tasty.

To take the Cherokees' "waste-not" policies a bit further, the shanks can not only add a significant yield to your burger-grind pile but they can also stand by themselves (a pun a day...). When prepared in a crockpot or Dutch oven, using a lamb shank recipe for instance, they can make a surprisingly tender and flavorful, and not unattractive, presentation.

Or, if you're not quite ready to make the leap to deer shank as an entrée, you might get there in stages. Start by boiling them with a few pieces of carrot, celery and onion, with salt and pepper and some spices, as you would squirrel for Brunswick stew. Pick the meat when it's cooked to the falling-off-the-bone point. It's firm but not tough when slow-cooked with moist heat. The look, consistency and taste is something like squirrel and it can go nicely into many recipes that call for tree rat. Soups and stews other than Brunswick are also possibilities. Again, there's more to a deer than hams, shoulders and backstraps.

SOMETHING OLD

If you're semi-converted and ready to consider stocking the freezer with additional cuts when deer season rolls around again, you could be in for some pleasant surprises. But, for now, we'll turn to some different ways to prepare the venison you may already have on hand.

Since, by the title alone, we're committed to some treatment of backstrap, we'll cover a few simple and quick options for the next time you decide to fire up the grill. Marinades and rubs are probably the most popular ways most of us prep a tender cut of venison for the coals. We've included a list of ingredients for one of each that you may want to try.

A word about flavoring venison: Experienced hunters know that an animal not cared for properly in the field, and during all stages of aging and preparation before it reaches the table, can't be salvaged by any amount of flavoring or method of cooking. So, if you know you've got a quality product to work with, fewer spices and flavors for a shorter time should allow you to enjoy the delicate flavor of quality venison. Complement it, but don't mask it.

That said, the marinade recipe presented here is tried and true. The sesame oil and scallions give this one a bit of a different taste. Using fresh ginger and garlic versus powders or salts (save those



CUBED VENISON CHILI

for the rub) will also help. You may want to marinate your venison in this concoction for one to two days. It will stand a longer soak, but the soy sauce flavor can get pretty strong after a while.

The rub doesn't take as long to do its magic. Apply it and refrigerate the meat, wrapped in plastic wrap, for as little as 30 minutes to an hour and you'll still get acceptable results. I personally enjoy the flavor of venison so I'm not too interested in trying to cover it up or hide the aforementioned "wild" taste. If you're of a like mind, try using only very basic spices like fresh, coarse-ground black pepper and salt plus rubbing the meat with a clove of fresh garlic. If you go the traditional route, try keeping the time between using marinades and applying rubs to a minimum. But if you like lots of spices and a stronger flavor, leave it in or rub it on 'til the spirit moves you.

For a bit of variety, consider cutting a backstrap into three pieces and use a different preparation approach with each piece. In addition to the marinade and rub, a really simple and quick option is a glaze. For a 6-inch or so cut of meat, try a half-cup of good maple syrup and a quarter-stick of butter. Add a dash or three of your favorite hot sauce, or Tabasco, and brush the glaze on the meat as much as you like while it's grilling. But, be quick about it because if you grill venison much past medium rare, you're going to sacrifice much of the flavor and most of the tenderness.

Backstrap is a dense and very lean cut of meat. There is no marbling fat running through it as with beef and it simply won't tolerate drying out from overcooking. If your or your guests' tastes run to medium and beyond, beef tenderloin cooked to order, served with venison around medium rare, would be something to consider.



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CUBED VENISON CHILI

**3 lbs. venison roast
cut into cubes**

1½ cup chopped onion

**1 cup chopped bell peppers
(different colors if preferred)**

2 tsp. salt

2 cans tomato soup

2 cups water

3 tbsp. chili powder

2 tsp. cumin powder

½ cup ketchup

2–3 tsp. sugar

**2 cans black beans
(Usually around 15 oz. cans
for all beans/drain all cans)**

2 cans red kidney beans

1 can pinto beans

2 cans diced tomatoes

As with any chili recipe, ingredients and ratios are guidelines. Next time we may try brown sugar versus white, or some of both, and may add a bit of molasses. Start with the basics and taste as it cooks. Adjust as you see fit. Brown the venison cubes in oil or bacon fat and drain. Combine all ingredients in covered pot. Simmer until done. Makes a gallon or more.



That way you keep everyone happy and you may even convert some non-game eaters to a healthier red meat.

There are always going to be those folks who, for whatever reason, don't want to "eat Bambi." That's fine. I'm not crazy about escargot, or even snails for that matter. It's a personal thing. I wouldn't push anyone to force down perfectly good, perfectly cooked venison. But it doesn't hurt to make the option available.

SOMETHING NEW

A piece of tenderloin is pretty hard to mistake for something else. But there are ways to serve venison that aren't quite so easily identified.

Should you want to try something new, soak a venison ham in molasses, allspice and salt for three weeks and bake it. Doesn't that sound just swell?

If you think it sounds bad, wait until you see it. It looks like a big lump of coal when it comes out of the marinade and it doesn't get any better looking as it cooks. It just looks like a slightly smaller lump of coal—but looks are deceiving.

We've been cooking venison hams this way for years and I don't remember anyone who didn't comment on how good—and different—it is. It would be a lie to say there haven't been a couple of folks who fell back on calling it "interesting"—a term that can apply to most anything when you don't really know what

to say or are trying not to offend—and that's OK, too. Better "interesting" than awful.

Just to put your mind at ease, when sliced, a diamond appears from the lump of coal—it's a rich red color inside and looks much like it tastes.

The recipe covers the amount of the ingredients and the cooking time and methods, as most good recipes do. Just remember to discard the marinade before baking the ham but keep the juices produced during cooking. Again, venison is dense and lean, and some of the juices, or broth, created during cooking can be heated and poured over the dish when served to pick things up a bit if you choose.

Slicing is not the only use for this hard-working ham. You can make a different tasting, and looking, spread from some of the outside or end pieces after slicing the choice cuts for serving as you choose. Simply grind a pound of ham in a food processor, using a chopping or grinding blade and start with a cup of mayonnaise, a cup of pickle relish with some of the juice, and a half-cup of yellow mustard. Blend and taste. Then add more of anything you like if you choose and you'll wind up with about four cups of spread.

If you try the ham recipe and the ham salad and like it, remember that you can freeze pound packages of the cooked ham to make batches of spread at any time. It keeps well and once thawed, takes about 10 minutes to prepare.

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MOLASSES-BAKED VENISON HAM

2 cups molasses

3 tbsp. ground allspice

½ cup salt

Wash prepared venison ham. Place in sealable plastic bag with other ingredients. Turn occasionally over a three-week period (a few days more or less would probably not be noticeable). Remove ham and discard marinade. Place in baking bag according to directions on package. Place on broiler pan and bake at 325 degrees for 60–90 minutes. Let cool. Remove ham. Reserve cooking juices as a broth or gravy.

VENISON BACKSTRAP MARINADE

1 to 1½ cup soy sauce

1 tsp. minced fresh garlic

1 tsp. minced fresh ginger

¼ cup sugar

3 green onions chopped

2 tbsp. sesame oil

1 tbsp. sesame seeds (optional)

Mix all ingredients in a sealable bag, add venison, and place in refrigerator two days to a week, depending on how strong you prefer the marinade taste. This amount of marinade will handle a good-sized backstrap nicely.

CHUNKY CHILI

Finally, beyond backstrap, way beyond, is chili. Most hunters would agree, I expect, that probably half of all venison consumed winds up ground. The amount of ground venison burger and sausage produced annually in the United States, if put up in pound packages and stacked end-on-end would reach who knows how high. You heard it here first.

We grind our own venison and use lots of it in many dishes. But, for this chili recipe, we used cubed venison for a change. It's not just a Texas thing, and it makes for a different look and taste.

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VENISON BACKSTRAP RUB

Kosher salt

Fresh ground coarse black pepper

Granulated garlic or garlic powder

Brown sugar

Instant coffee crystals

You're on your own as to the amounts and ratios here. It depends on taste and the size of the piece or pieces of venison you're preparing. Mix all ingredients and pat/rub into the meat liberally 30 minutes to an hour before cooking. Grill over just-grey charcoal or on a very hot gas grill. Again, the cooking time depends on the size and thickness of the meat, grill conditions, and your taste. Medium rare is the suggested doneness.

MAPLE SYRUP GLAZE

1 cup maple syrup

½ stick butter

A few dashes of hot sauce, Tabasco or cayenne pepper

This amount should cover the average whole backstrap adequately. Melt the butter in the syrup with the hot sauce and brush on liberally as you grill the venison. Keep an eye on your backstrap when grilling with a glaze. Sugars burn easily on the grill.

A good cut of venison prepared this way can pretty much pass for very lean beef, should you want another way to introduce non-hunters to the healthy pleasures of game.

We cut up a 3-pound venison top round roast for this recipe and the final product—over a gallon of chili—seemed "meatier" than with ground venison. Like the venison ham, this freezes well. ♡

Keith Hobbs lives in Raleigh and has been hunting, fishing and cooking game for many years. This is his first article for Wildlife in North Carolina.