

Well, now what?

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Every Thanksgiving, health permitting, I go hunting for an hour or so before the eatin and greetin begins. I suspect this year will be no different. Last year, on a beautiful TG morning, I killed a double, a small buck and a doe. It set the stage for a great Thanksgiving, much better than the one five years ago when I was in a coma in the Vanderbilt ICU.

But see, I have to write this column in advance so I am in a quandary as to what to write about. Then it hit me. A sweet young woman I know wanted some deer meat and I gave her a package of prime deer steaks. A day later, I asked her if she knew how to marinade them.

“Yes,” she answered with a smile, “my brother told me to soak them in Coca-Cola.” I tried hard not to scream and puke.

Every year, I am bombarded with questions on cooking deer meat and other wild game. I also hear, “I just can’t eat “venison”. Yes, I will explain the quotation marks around venison. Venison is the meat from any member of the deer family. That includes elk, moose, and caribou and probably some I do not know about. So, when speaking about deer meat from a whitetail deer, call it deer meat to be technical.

I am not going to scribble down some recipes. I am going to talk about composition and how to work with it. Composition is how deer meat is made up-what it has and what it lacks. I am also going to assume you not only killed your own deer but processed it as well. Because if you did not process your own deer meat, you lost control of it.

So, you have killed a deer...just minutes ago. Do you want the best tasting meat possible? Of course, you do and that is, why you field dressed it immediately. I mean as quickly as possible. That cools the body cavity down and in that vein, you also maybe hosed the body cavity out and placed a bag of ice or two inside to aid that cooling until you can begin skinning and butchering. That is what I do. I keep liter bottles of frozen water just for that. Better than melting ice. Unless

you have a walk-in cooler, forget hanging and aging. The days of hanging one from the tree limb in the backyard are just not feasible in this day of neighbors.

Just a quick note here about that “wild, gamey taste”. Deer meat of course, has no wild or gamey taste. It tastes like deer meat. When improperly handled, it can become so wild and gamey you can't eat it.

What a deer eats has a great deal to do with the taste. Midwest, corn fed deer taste better than Texas, mesquite fed deer. Just a fact of nature. Ours is in between the two. The bad taste reposes to a huge extent in the fat and sinew. Obviously, we want to remove that. It must be done by hand. Many commercial processors do not do so. I process my own. However, a good processor will remove some or even most.

Now we skin the deer. You know how to do that. Moreover, with a knife, you bone out the meat. No saw. You can get videos to teach you that. You are now ready to cut and wrap. Videos for that, too. Here is a tip. A vacuum packer is worth the money. I also pre-wrap mine in plastic wrap. WAIT! Before you wrap anything, take some time and trim that meat close. Anything that is white, yellow, blue or clear comes off. Nothing goes in that package but meat. Commercial processors seldom do that and that is why I do my own. If you don't do that, no need to read the rest of this column.

Okay, time to marinade. Trust me, I won't use coke. Because deer meat has little to no marbling, fat mixed in with the meat, it tends to be tough and dry if not properly handled. That is why bacon and EVOO are your friends. My marinade is simple. EVOO and Worcestershire sauce, just enough to color the blend. Then I add some garlic, some onion, a slice of any citrus fruit and some pepper. I put all that in a zip-loc bag, add the meat and put in the fridge for 2-24 hours, depending on when I remembered to marinade it.

Before cooking, I shake off the excess marinade, sprinkle liberally with meat tenderizer and wrap in bacon. Bacon provides the fat and therefore the moist texture. No matter how I cook it, except for a roast, I cook it medium rare-internal temp 155 degree Fahrenhuggle. Cook deer meat or any wild game well done, might as well give it to the dog straightaway instead of trying to eat it first.

The only part I usually fry is the tenderloin; the rest is done on the outdoor grill or in the Crockpot or Dutch oven. I cut the tenderloin in nuggets and fry, as I would chicken. Fantastic with cream gravy or on biscuits for breakfast.

It is that simple to have tasty deer meat. But it is just as easy to have tasteless deer meat or even impossible to cut or eat deer meat. Just do the following:

- (1) Throw it in the truck intact and drive all over town showing it off. Even better if it is a warm day.
- (2) Wait as long as possible to cool body cavity down.
- (3) Take to a commercial processor you don't know.
- (4) Forget all about marinade and bacon.
- (5) Just throw it in a pan and fry it for a few hours.
- (6) In many instances, let your wife decide how well done it should be.

Any of the above six and a few others can ruin deer meat. So listen, have a happy TG and if you hunt that day, keep this column in mind. It really can make all the difference in the world.

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