

About 950 words

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TENDER VENISON

Cooking tender cuts is simple

-- if you do it right.

You want to know what's wrong with America? Well, don't ask me. Whatever it is, though, another few million couples like the Robertsons would fix it up. Norma wins prizes for cooking at the county fair. Dave keeps his family fed on game. They live in the middle of Montana, which is nice, but I've seen as many deer in the suburban east. The secret is energy, I guess. Dave and Norma are both working at something all the time -- on the job or in the field. The vegetable garden is weedless and the kitchen floor is scrubbed. The walls hold Dave's silver-fox pelts, Norma's blue ribbons, and a picture of her father before he left Norway to set up a homestead in the land of opportunity. (A friend of mine who ran for Congress once told me that he felt good when he rang the

bell of a house like the Robertsons'. The people, he said, would be steady, and they'd make their vote count.)

Dave took me hunting and showed me the first three steps of the Robertson system for living on venison: shooting, dressing, and aging. He did not comment on the antlers that happened to be attached to my mule deer. They weren't big enough to make good conversation. He was pleased, however, that the buck was heavy and had no rutty smell yet. He also approved of my old .257 rifle. Its 100-grain bullet at modest velocity had spoiled only a few inches of rib on each side of the chest. Neck-shots, Dave said, damage too much meat.

We cooled the deer quickly by opening it from throat to tail. We removed the innards starting with the windpipe, right up under the jaw. We saved the liver, heart, and kidneys. We split the rib cage but left the pelvis intact. Any cuts in it would allow some of the best meat to dry out, Dave said.

Back at the Robertsons' house, we hung the buck under the porch. Dave wedged the rib-cage open with a stick for cooling but left the skin on. He explained that it would prevent the outside of the carcass from developing a crust, wasting meat. My deer was not ready for butchering yet, but another one was: a plump, early-season whitetail doe of Dave's. It had been aging for the recommended time -- one week.

Dave and Norma cut the meat as a team, saving every scrap. They separated the tough from the tender cuts and marked the wrapping paper accordingly. Norma said that cooking methods would

be radically different. You had to make up your mind before you got started: tough meat or tender? The tender kind -- which I stayed around long enough to sample -- came from the saddle and hindquarters.

At dinner-time, Norma did not start frying till her guest was through telling stories. If she had left the steaks on the heat while I was finishing a sentence, the tenderness and flavor might have dried up.

VENISON STEAKS WITH MADEIRA SAUCE

For the venison:

2 to 2½ lbs. tender steaks cut 1½" thick

2 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons cooking oil

For flouring:

2 tablespoons flour

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon ground dry ginger

¼ teaspoon dried thyme

¼ teaspoon fresh-ground black pepper

For the sauce:

¼ cup Madeira wine

½ cup redcurrant jelly

Mix the dry ingredients, making a seasoned flour. Press it into the steaks by pounding them lightly with a meat hammer. Have

the fat sizzling at a medium-high setting on your range. Sear the first side of the meat till crusty-brown, which takes just two or three minutes. Then flip the steaks and cook the second side in the same way. You'll know that you've got the method right if the meat browns on both sides while the middle is still rare. If your steaks stay gray on the outside, you may have put them in before the fat was hot enough. Or you may have crowded too many into a small pan, steaming the meat rather than searing it.

Transfer the steaks to a warm platter. Add the wine and jelly to the pan, mixing with the pan juices. Pour into a small sauce-dish and serve with baked or boiled potatoes. You have to work fast, because venison loses flavor as it cools.

This meal is moderately low in fat despite the use of butter and oil for frying. Most supermarket meat is marbled with fat even if the package is marked "lean," but venison is really lean. It needs some added fat.

One more thing: Norma said that "you've got to know your pan," and hers was a big one of black, seasoned cast-iron. It was never covered for this recipe, not even for a minute to keep the dinner warm.

I hung around hunting with Dave for a second day, which gave me a chance to sample another recipe. This one made use of the tender venison that came off the deer in pieces too small for steaks.

SKEWERED VENISON

For the venison:

1 lb. tender meat cut in 1" cubes

For the marinade:

3 tablespoons oil

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup soy sauce

2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce

2 cloves minced garlic

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup water

Marinate meat 8 to 24 hours. Skewer the cubes. Norma likes to put water-chestnuts wrapped in bacon between the chunks of venison, but you can suit your fancy. Grill quickly over charcoal or a wood fire. Serve over a bed of rice.

In this recipe, fat is added to the venison by the oil-based marinade. Its ingredients also add some variety to the flavor, but the point is not to camouflage the taste. You'll like the natural taste if you shoot, age, and butcher as the Robertsons do.

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