

Venison Alchemy

Slow, moist cooking can turn even the toughest deer, pronghorn, or elk cuts into delicious, fork-tender entrees.

Venison Pot Roast



By Tom Dickson

While visiting family in the Twin Cities several years ago, my wife, Lisa, and I treated ourselves to dinner at a swanky new restaurant in downtown St. Paul. I ordered the Braised Moroccan Lamb Shanks. The chunks of fatty lamb slid off the bone into a succulent sauce of onions, tomatoes, pureed figs, and a mixture of nutmeg, cinnamon, and other fragrant spices. Only Lisa's withering scowl kept me from lifting the platter and licking it clean.

On the plane ride home I thought of how braising and stewing miraculously transform the toughest cuts of meat into tender morsels. I had discovered these slow-and-moist cooking techniques years earlier from Ken Geoff, a Twin Cities chef nationally known for his game recipes. Deer, elk, and other big game animals, he explained, are composed of two fundamentally different cuts of meat: the tender and the tough. Each needs to be cooked with a completely different method.

Meat is muscle, and the muscles an animal uses less vigorously, like the loin and rump, have closely grained texture. Lacking tough, internal tissue, these naturally tender cuts are best cooked quickly at high temperatures over dry heat and generally served medium rare. Think grilled steaks or pan-seared loin chops.

Muscles an animal constantly puts in motion and use—the neck, shoulders, and legs—are marbled with connective tissue (known as collagen) and have a coarser grain. When grilled or pan-fried at high heat, that tough tissue seizes up and turns a shoulder roast, for

Better than burger: Getting to know the tough cuts

Tough cuts: Cook slowly, with moist, low-temperature heat.

Tender cuts: Cook fast, with dry, high-temperature heat.



Hind shanks: Braise shanks with the bone in, slice the shank crosswise into 3-inch-thick segments, or fillet the meat off the bone.



Ribs: Fillet rib meat out from between the ribs. The tough tissue surrounding the meat breaks down when cooked slowly.



Brisket: Like the ribs, these flat slabs of meat are surrounded by tough tissue that melts into a delicious, velvety gelatin when braised.

Front shanks: Same as the hind shanks, you can braise these with the bone in or out.

Shoulder: Braised whole, this is the classic pot roast cut. Your grandma traditionally made this with a beef shoulder chuck roast.



Neck: The neck makes a terrific pot roast. Use a smaller animal such as a juvenile or doe deer or pronghorn.



MEAT CUT PHOTOS FROM ALBERTA WAPITI PRODUCTS CO-OP

example, into what tastes like a cooked catcher's mitt. Yet when cooked slowly with moist heat at low temperatures—think Grandma's pot roast—the collagen melts into a flavorful, gelatinous goo that lubricates the fork-tender meat. "Shot through with gelatin, the meat melts on your tongue," writes Daniel Boulud, a French chef and author of *Braise: A Journey Through International Cuisine*. "Thickened with gelatin, the sauce clings and shines."

Both braising and stewing are slow, moist, low-temperature cooking methods that tenderize tough cuts. Stewing calls for using small meat chunks completely covered in a simmering liquid. Braising is for larger cuts such as a shank or a shoulder roast and requires less liquid, which only partially covers the meat. Stews are generally served in their cooking liquid, while braised meats are removed and a sauce or gravy is made with the residue liquid.

For years I had been making venison stews and pot roasts to great acclaim from friends and family. However, I had never considered tackling the shanks. Usually I filleted them like fish, saving the tiny strips of meat for sausage and tossing the hard, opaque casings in the trash. After my lamb dinner I wondered if I could create something similar with deer or pronghorn shanks. I knew nothing of Mediterranean cooking, but I thought a recipe in the *Joy of Cooking* might work: braised lamb shanks with Middle-Eastern spices. Prepared with the lean venison, the dish was not nearly as rich as with lamb shanks, but nevertheless the meat was succulent, tender, and infused with spices, wine, and tomato. That and other recipes have transformed what I long considered lesser cuts of venison into ones that have become some of our family's favorite meals.

If you don't butcher elk, deer, or pronghorn yourself, ask your meat processor to label the shoulder roasts separately, trim the shank meat off the bone and label it, and save and label the entire neck roast from pronghorn and deer fawns and small does. That way you will know which cuts to cook hot and fast and which to cook slowly with moist heat at low temperatures.

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.



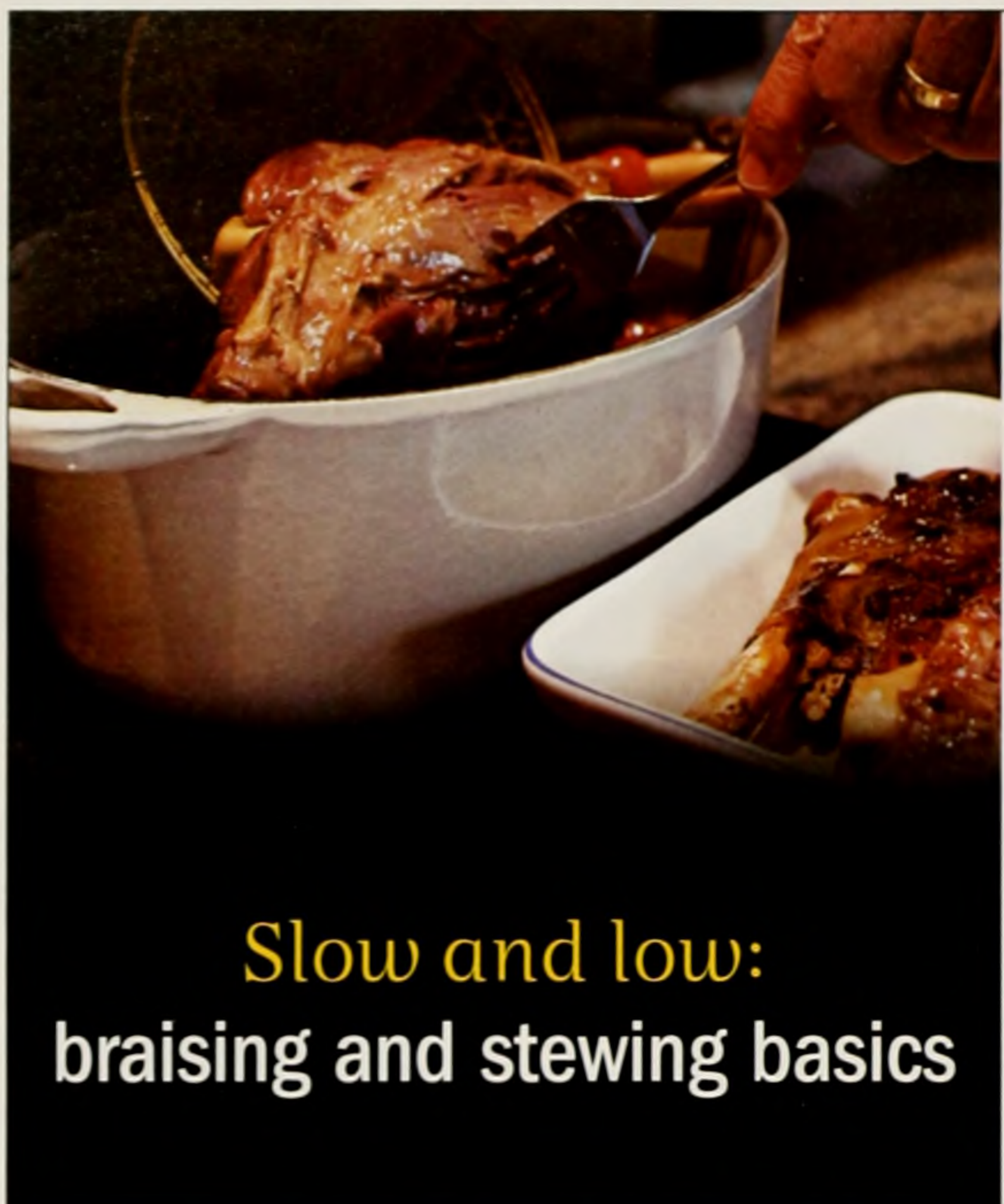
MONTANA OUTDOORS

TOM DICKSON



Mediterranean Venison Shanks

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Slow and low: braising and stewing basics

Pot

The ideal pot is a heavy Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid or an enamel-coated cast iron casserole dish. These pots allow you to brown the meat in the container. Crock pots work well, but the meat must be browned in a separate pan beforehand.

Heat

Braise or stew on the stove top at low heat, keeping the liquid at a slow simmer, stirring every half hour or so. Even better is to cook the dish in the oven at 275° or 300°, which provides more uniform cooking temperatures.

Browning

This first step doesn't "seal in the juices" as is commonly thought; it gives the meat a dark brown outer color and imparts a toasty caramelized flavor to the dish. The meat can be

dredged first in flour seasoned with salt and pepper. The flour absorbs more cooking oil, which adds flavor, and helps thicken the liquid as the dish cooks. The trick to browning is to make sure the meat sizzles but does not burn.

Add flavor

The next step in many recipes is to remove the meat and add chopped carrots, onions, and various herbs and spices. This creates a more flavorful braise or stew.

Simmer

Finally, a liquid is added, typically beer, wine, bourbon, broth, or water. The essential element of stewing or braising is to *simmer* the meat in the liquid for several hours at a low temperature. If the liquid boils, the meat may tighten into a knot as tough as a baseball.



Elk Stroganoff

Venison Bourguignonne

(I prepare this wine stew using all the tough pieces I trim off the shoulder and lower haunches. It's based on the Beef Bourguignonne recipe from the Joy of Cooking, with some alterations. This wonderfully rich and luscious dish tastes even better if you can cook it ahead of time and let it sit for a few days.)

2 pounds boneless venison shoulder meat

Place meat in a large glass or ceramic bowl and add:

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| 2 C. dry red wine | ¼ C. olive oil |
| 1 carrot, peeled and chopped | 1 onion, chopped |
| 1 clove garlic, chopped | 1 bay leaf |
| 2 T. chopped fresh parsley | ½ t. dried thyme |
| 1 t. pepper | ½ t. salt |

Stir to combine and coat the meat. Cover and marinate in the refrigerator for 1 hour to 24 hours, turning the meat occasionally. Drain the beef and pat dry. Strain the marinade and reserve it and the vegetables separately. Heat a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add and brown:

4 oz. bacon, diced

Remove the bacon and place on paper towels to drain. In the bacon grease (if there is not at least 2 tablespoons, add vegetable oil), add the venison in batches and brown on all sides. This will likely require at least three batches. Don't overcrowd the pan or the meat will simmer and not brown—and brown (though not burned) is what you want at this stage. Remove meat and add the reserved vegetables and cook until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Stir in:

2 T. flour

Cook, stirring, 1 minute. Stir in the marinade, then return the venison and bacon to the pan. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and cook, covered, until the meat is fork tender, about 2 hours. (Another option is to preheat the oven to 275 degrees when browning the meat, and then put the pot in the oven for 2 hours). Add:

8 oz. mushrooms, quartered.

Cover and cook 20 minutes. Add:

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| ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley | Salt and pepper to taste |
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Serve with egg noodles, rice, or boiled potatoes.

Doe Neck Pot Roast

(This produces the most flavorful venison I've ever tasted. Unlike many pot roast recipes, mine calls for braising the meat in browned, finely chopped vegetables, which I then puree to make the gravy. Add larger vegetables during the last few minutes to keep them from becoming mushy. This recipe works best with smaller deer or pronghorn necks as well as the traditional shoulder roasts from any big game animal.)

Preheat oven to 275°.

Season with salt and pepper:

Deer or pronghorn neck

Heat in large skillet or Dutch oven:

4 T. lard or vegetable oil

Add neck roast and brown on all sides, about 20 minutes.

Remove roast to a plate. Add:

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| 2 C. finely chopped onions | ½ C. finely chopped celery |
| ½ C. finely chopped carrots | |

Cook vegetables, stirring occasionally, until they begin to color, about 5 minutes. Add:

1 C. beef stock or dry red wine

Bring to boil. Add:

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| 1 bay leaf | ½ t. dried thyme |
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Return roast to pan and cover. Make sure there is always at least 1 inch of liquid in pot and add more if needed. Cook in oven for 2 to 3 hours, removing and turning roast occasionally. Add:

1 C. carrots, cut into 1-inch pieces

Cook for 5 minutes. Remove roast and carrots and set aside while making the gravy. Pour pan liquid and finely chopped vegetables into a blender and puree for 3 minutes. Return to pot. Add cooked carrots and:

1 C. frozen peas

Bring to simmer. Meanwhile, the neck roast will have cooled enough to pick the meat off the bone. Serve the meat and the vegetable gravy over egg noodles or boiled potatoes.

Mediterranean Venison Shanks

(This derivation of the Joy of Cooking's braised lamb shanks recipe is a bit sweeter and spicier, and I add fat to compensate for the lean venison shanks. The recipe calls for a wild mix of spices, but don't get nervous: There's nothing here you can't find at your local supermarket. Unlike lamb shanks, deer and elk shanks are too large to fit in a pan. I cut them in pieces or fillet the shank meat off the bone before cooking. Don't worry that the meat is encased in hard tissue casings. The slow, moist-cooking method will melt the tissue off the meat and produce tender chunks of savory venison.)

Preheat oven to 275°.

2 deer shanks or 1 elk shank

Season meat with:

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| 1 t. salt | ½ t. pepper |
| ½ t. ground ginger | ½ t. paprika |

Mix in a bowl and set aside:

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| 1 t. dried or 1 T. fresh mint | 1 t. paprika |
| 1 t. ground coriander | 1 t. ground cumin |
| ½ t. black pepper | ¼ t. ground ginger |
| pinch of ground cinnamon | ¼ t. ground allspice |

Heat in a Dutch oven or large cast iron skillet over high heat:

2 T. oil

Add half the shank meat and brown on all sides, about 5 minutes. Remove, add more oil, and brown the remaining meat. The smell of sautéed casing tissue is unpleasant but will disappear once braising begins. Add:

2 onions, thinly sliced

2 T. chopped garlic

Reduce heat to medium and cover and cook, stirring often, until onions are soft. Sprinkle with spice mixture. Stir well to coat onions. Add:

2 C. beef stock

1 C. dry red wine

⅓ C. tomato puree

Bring to boil. Return venison to pan, cover, and bake for 90 minutes. Add:

2 C. 1-inch carrot pieces

1 C. dried figs, chopped

2 C. diced, peeled butternut or Hubbard squash

Cover and bake 15 minutes more. Remove meat and vegetables. Add:

2 T. lemon juice

½ t. cayenne pepper

2 t. dried mint (or 3 T. of fresh)

1 can garbanzo beans

Pour sauce over meat and vegetables and serve over couscous (a delicious North African granular pasta available in most Montana grocery stores), white rice, or boiled potatoes. Top with a dollop of sour cream.

Venison Stroganoff

(Ken Geoff's version of the famous Russian stew is easy and delicious. Serve with warm bread for sopping up the flavorful sour cream gravy afterward.)

Preheat oven to 300°.

Mix:

Salt and pepper into 1½ C. flour

In seasoned flour, dredge:

1½ pounds trimmed shoulder meat, cut into ¾-inch cubes

Heat in a large cast iron pan or Dutch oven:

1 T. butter or light cooking oil

When butter or oil is foaming but not yet smoking, add coated meat in batches and brown on all sides, cooking roughly 2 minutes per batch.

Remove meat from pan and add more oil and butter. Then add:

¾ C. thinly sliced onion

Saute 2 minutes until softened. Stir in:

1½ C. sliced mushrooms

Cook 2 minutes. Stir in:

1 T. tomato paste or ½ C. tomato puree

1½ C. beef stock or broth

Pinch salt and pepper

Add meat to pan. Add enough water to cover meat. Bring to boil. Cover with lid. Bake in oven 1½ hours. Remove from oven. Stir in:

3 T. sour cream

2 T. butter

Serve over egg noodles or mashed potatoes. Sprinkle with chopped parsley.