

# 24-CARAT VENISON



QUICK SAUTÉED VENISON STEAK WITH PORT SAUCE

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## ADVICE ON PREPARING GOLD-STANDARD MEALS FROM PRIME CUTS OF DEER AND ELK MEAT

When the hunting season ends, I like to open our freezer and gaze at those tidy white packets of wrapped venison, stacked on the shelves like bricks of gold. And considering what farm-raised venison sells for these days, it has become the meat equivalent of 24-carat bullion. Specialty game shops across the country charge up to \$55 a pound for loin chops and other choice cuts of farm-raised venison (tougher cuts such as shoulder run substantially less, though still far more than beef or even lamb). Using an average of \$20 a pound, I figure each doe I harvest provides my family with meat that would cost a nonhunter \$1,000 or more. ▶▶

BY TOM DICKSON



Those prices make king crab legs and lobsters look like items in the food bargain bin.

Why the high premium on venison? First, deer, elk, and antelope meat is good for you. Venison is low in calories, cholesterol, and fat, especially the saturated kind. It's also high in iron and vitamin B-12. Many people consider venison the original free-range, organic meat.

Second, wild venison is good for the environment. I don't know about domestically raised deer and elk, much of it grown in New Zealand, but the whitetails and pronghorn I harvest each fall tread with a gentle hoofprint on the landscape.

Third, nonhunters pay top dollar for venison because they consider it a rare treat, a meat purchased from specialty shops or in fine restaurants. (That comes as a surprise to people who grew up eating deer, elk, and antelope meat and consider it everyday fare.)

*Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.*



**THE KEY TO PRESERVING VENISON'S SWEETNESS?**  
**COOK TENDER CUTS QUICKLY AT HIGH HEAT.**

Finally, there's the taste. I eat grass-fed beef and locally raised lamb, and occasionally dive into a rack of barbecued pork ribs. But if restricted to just one meat, it would be that of a bottomlands whitetail doe. A trimmed raw venison steak in the hand smells as fresh as a cool fall morning. When cooked, it becomes delicately textured and

finely flavored. I'm not alone in my praise. Chefs throughout the world extol venison's culinary virtues.

Like beef, there are basically two categories of venison cuts: tough and tender. Each requires a different, and completely opposite, cooking technique. The article "Venison Alchemy" (November–December 2007) covered shanks, shoulders, and other tough cuts. It explained how the combination of moist heat, low temperature, and long cooking is essential for breaking down tough tissue and creating succulent, fork-tender dishes. What follows are recommendations for cooking the prime cuts—steaks, roasts, and medallions from the upper rump and the loin (the two long cylinders of meat, also known as the backstrap, on either side of the spine).

In many respects, cooks can view venison as they do beef. Both are the dark red meat of large grazing animals. And the cuts from both grazers

are similar: A sirloin of venison is a steak that comes from the lower back of the animal, as does beef sirloin.

But that's where the deer and the cow part company—and where cooks need to understand the fundamental differences between the two. Beef fat is tasty and marbled throughout the meat. Venison fat, on the other hand, tastes like boiled or burned leather when cooked. It exists only on the outside of the meat, primarily over the lower back and rump, and always should be trimmed.

Lacking veins of fat within the meat, uncooked venison has less moisture than beef. Though less fat content makes a serving of venison steak one-half leaner than a similar-sized beef steak, it also causes venison to dry out when cooking, requiring the use of cooking oils.

Many chefs and restaurant diners maintain that venison has more flavor than beef. Heavy with fat, beef has a mild, rich taste. Lacking fat, venison is tangier and more intense. That sweet tang comes from abundant capillaries in the muscle, providing the blood that gives raw venison steaks their rich, burgundy color. Blood is sweet; if you accidentally prick your finger and suck it, you can taste that sweetness. Chefs try to retain the sweet taste of venison by not overcooking the meat.

The longer you cook venison, the more bitter it becomes. That's what many people call the "gamey" taste. It's the same bitterness that comes from overdone liver, compared to the sweet taste of liver cooked just briefly at a high temperature.

The key to preserving venison's sweetness? Cook all tender cuts quickly at high heat.

My five favorite recipes for prime venison follow on the next page. With these and other choice-cut dishes, an essential first step is to remove all fat and "silver skin"—the white connective tissue running through the meat. When in doubt, cut off anything that's white.

Also, keep in mind that the gold-standard recipe for any choice cut is to simply season it with salt and pepper and grill or sauté the meat in olive oil for several minutes on each side. No sauces. No marinades. Just the sweet taste of venison. ▶▶



VENISON SANDWICH

## VENISON: A HEALTHY, FREE-RANGE, ORGANIC MEAT

*Venison is high in protein and low in fat and carbohydrates.*

**SERVING SIZE: 4 OZ. (113.40 g)**

- Calories .....180
- Calories from fat.....32.5
- Protein .....34.25 g
- Carbohydrates.....0.00 g
- Total fat.....3.61 g



NUTRIENTS	AMOUNT	DAILY VALUE*
Thiamin B-1.....	0.20 mg	13%
Riboflavin B-2.....	0.68 mg	40%
Niacin B-3.....	7.61mg	38%
Vitamin B-6.....	0.43 mg	21.5%
Vitamin B-12.....	3.60 mcg	60%
Vitamin D.....	13.61 IU	3.4%
Vitamin E.....	0.28 mg	1.4%
Folate.....	5.35 mcg	1.34%
Calcium.....	7.93 mg	0.79%
Iron.....	5.07 mg	28%
Magnesium.....	27.21 mg	6.8%
Potassium.....	379.89 mg	10.85%
Selenium.....	14.63 mcg	20.9%
Sodium.....	61.24 mg	2.55%
Zinc.....	3.12 mg	20.8%
Omega 3 fatty acids.....	0.11 g	4.58%
Omega 6 fatty acids.....	0.60	—

Source: The George Mateljan Foundation/www.whfoods.com  
\* Percent daily value based on a 2,000-calorie diet. U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

**Gamey Venison?** Other than the severely overdone steak my cousin Bobby fried up in his camper many years ago, I've never had so-called "bad" or gamey venison. Still, I know plenty of people who have. The most likely explanations for their distasteful experiences:

- 1. Sautéing or grilling the fat or silver skin:** Unlike the tasty fat marbled through beef, the fat on deer and elk exists on the outside of the meat and reeks when cooked. This "burned leather" smell occurs when you fry venison without cutting off all the white fat and "silver skin"—the thin white membrane running through many cuts. Removing silver skin is like filleting a fish: Run a sharp knife with the edge angled against the membrane, not the meat, while pulling the silver skin tightly with the other hand.
- 2. Overcooking:** Overcooking any blood-rich meat—including liver and duck—results in a bitter taste caused by the blood overheating.
- 3. Improper field dressing or butchering:** If the animal's intestines are punctured during field dressing, the smelly bile and other matter can spill onto the meat and taint the flavor. If this happens, immediately wash off any intestinal matter, urine, feces, or udder milk with water or snow. Also, cool the deer or elk as soon as possible. This prevents bacteria from growing and "souring" the meat. Keep butchered cuts free of hair and, when sawing bone, bone dust, which smells like burned hair when cooked. Cut out all bloodshot meat where the bullet or lead fragments tore tissue and caused hemorrhaging.
- 4. Stress, rut, and diet:** The facts on these possible causes are skimpy. Beef can get what is called dark-cutting, produced by stress that increases pH values. This causes the meat to turn dark red and, to some people, taste bad. No one is sure if stress also affects deer and elk. Many hunters say that rutting bucks or deer shot while running have a gamey taste. Also blamed for off-taste is a diet of mostly sage, though prairie mule deer and pronghorn usually taste fine. ■





### Venison with Onions and Balsamic Vinegar

*This elegant dish is easy and delicious and takes less than a half hour to prepare.*

- 1 to 1½ lbs. loin or rump steak, trimmed
- Salt and pepper
- 3 T. olive oil or clarified butter
- 1 to 1½ C. red onion, thinly sliced
- ¼ C. balsamic vinegar
- ½ C. beef stock or water
- 4 T. cold butter

In a frying pan, heat 2 T. clarified butter or olive oil over high heat. Meanwhile, lightly season all sides of meat with salt and pepper.

Add meat to pan and brown, 4 to 6 minutes per side depending on size. Remove meat to cutting board.

Add remaining 1 T. of clarified butter or oil to pan and sauté onions until nicely browned.

Add vinegar and cook until pan is dry. Add stock or water and bring to a boil, stirring to scrape glaze from pan bottom. To the sauce add a pinch of salt and pepper.

Add 2 T. cold butter to sauce and whisk in. Remove from heat and whisk in remaining butter.

Slice meat thinly (½ inch) across the grain. Place slices on heated plates and pour sauce on and around. Serve with wild rice and steamed broccoli or carrots. Serves four.

### IS AGING VENISON NECESSARY?

Hunters I know who love venison age their deer or elk for two to seven days. During aging, enzymes break down the cell tissue in the meat, making it more tender and giving it a stronger and more complex flavor. Aging works particularly well on older animals, which have tougher meat. Hang the deer or elk in cool (33° to 50°F) temperatures, making sure you don't let the mercury drop below freezing. Meat that freezes and thaws repeatedly will dry out. Leave the skin on to retain moisture. You can also age skinned quarters, wrapped in cheesecloth, in a refrigerator. When butchering aged venison, trim off the dark meat that was exposed to air.

### Quick Sautéed Venison Steak with Port Sauce

*This is my go-to recipe for venison steaks when I get home late or we have guests drop by unexpectedly for dinner. Sometimes I throw some sautéed oyster or morel mushrooms on top for variety.*

- 2 sirloin or top rump steaks (8 oz. each), or 4 inch-thick loin medallions
- Salt and pepper
- 2 T. olive oil or clarified butter
- ¼ C. ruby port
- 1 T. cold butter

In a frying pan, heat clarified butter or olive oil over high heat. Meanwhile, lightly season both sides of steaks with salt and pepper.

Add meat to pan and brown on both sides, 2 to 3 minutes per side depending on thickness. Remove meat to cutting board.

Lower heat to medium. Deglaze pan with port, scraping up cooked bits from the pan bottom, for 1 minute. Remove from heat. Stir in juices from resting steaks. Add cold butter and whisk as it melts.

Place steaks on heated plates and pour sauce on top. Serves four.

### Montana Venison Steak Rub

*This is a hybrid of several different recipes, one of which is called Texas Steak Rub. It's a quick and easy way to spice up an ordinary venison steak.*

- 4 venison steaks (8 oz. each) rubbed with olive oil
- 3 T. maple syrup
- 1 T. chili powder
- 1 T. black pepper
- 1 t. cumin
- ½ t. ground coriander
- ¼ t. ground cloves
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 T. olive oil

Grill steaks over high heat, 3 minutes on each side. Meanwhile, mix ingredients in a glass or ceramic bowl. Rub steaks with the mixture and then grill them another 2 minutes per side.

### Mideastern Venison Kabobs

*I experimented with a half-dozen recipes pulled from the Internet and Mideastern cookbooks to find one that approximated the aromatic kabobs I had years ago on a visit to Turkey. Kabobs are a great way to use the small chunks you trim off prime roasts and steaks to make them more uniform. (Save small chunks off the shoulder and other tough cuts for stews.)*

- 2 lbs. venison steak or roast, cut into 1-inch cubes
- ½ C. olive oil
- 1 T. white vinegar
- 1 t. cumin
- ½ t. ground coriander
- ½ t. paprika
- 1 t. garlic, minced
- ½ t. salt
- Assorted vegetables

Mix all ingredients except meat and vegetables in a ceramic or glass bowl. Add venison and cover completely with marinade. Place in refrigerator and let sit for 4 to 24 hours.

Put meat on skewers and grill over high heat for a total of 6 to 8 minutes, turning every 2 minutes. I prefer to put my meat and like vegetables on separate skewers so I can cook them for different amounts of time. For instance, peppers and onions take much longer to cook than mushrooms.

### Venison Sandwich

*I love cold venison and eat dozens of these sandwiches each year.*

Bake a small roast at 325 degrees for 25 minutes in a toaster oven or regular oven. Once the roast cools, slice it thinly, apply a liberal amount of salt and pepper, and serve between slices of homemade bread with creamed horseradish. Small grilled steaks also make excellent sandwiches when served whole on grilled bread.

### Print a recipe for your recipe box

Visit *Montana Outdoors* on-line for printer-friendly versions of these recipes: [fwp.mt.gov/montana-outdoors](http://fwp.mt.gov/montana-outdoors)

### MIDEASTERN VENISON KABOBS



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