

Venison Loin with Sage, Squash, and Prunes

Preparation time: 30 minutes | Cooking time: 40-45 minutes | Serves 4



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The idea for this “Tasting Montana” column began in the mid-1990s following publication of a report by Yale University researcher Stephen Kellert on public attitudes toward hunting. Kellert found that the top reason nonhunters support hunting is when it is done to produce food, and the main reason they don’t support it is when the primary goal is to obtain a trophy.

At the time almost all hunting magazines and videos showed hunters posing with their large-antlered trophies, which sent a message that hunting is about conquest and bragging rights. Almost no media were covering the pleasures that come from turning wild game into delicious meals. It seemed odd to me that the hunting community and state wildlife agencies weren’t doing more to promote game meat consumption and thus build more support for hunting among the nonhunting public.

Also puzzling was the fact that, considering the millions of deer, ducks, and pheasants harvested each year nationwide, there weren’t better guides to cooking wild game meat. Back then almost all game cookbooks featured unappetizing snapshots of dishes that too often relied on a can of cream of mushroom soup.

But increasingly over the past 25 years, writers and chefs have filled that void. Foremost are the prolific cookbook author and *Hunter Angler Gardener Cook* website creator Hank Shaw, *Field & Stream*’s Wild Chef columnist Jonathan Miles (who first published the original version of the recipe at right), and the Bozeman-based MeatEater TV show and podcast host Steven Rinella. Today anyone can find scrumptious game and fish recipes from dozens of books and countless YouTube videos.

The purpose of this “Tasting Montana” page is to provide our readers with the most delicious of the growing number of recipes, especially those that can be prepared on weeknights for people with busy schedules.

I don’t know if reading this page increases support for hunting among the *Montana Outdoors* subscribers who don’t hunt. But at least they can see the passion so many of us have for what we bring home from the field and put on the table.

—Tom Dickson is the editor of *Montana Outdoors*.

INGREDIENTS

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
 ½ t. ground allspice
 ¼ t. ground star anise
 ¼ t. cinnamon
 6 T. vegetable oil
 4 venison loin steaks, 6-7 oz. each
 Packed ¼ c. finely chopped prunes
 2 T. cognac (optional but highly recommended)
 6 T. unsalted butter, softened at room temperature and cut into tablespoon-size pieces
 2 c. peeled and finely diced butternut squash
 10 fresh sage leaves, minced

DIRECTIONS

In a bowl, stir together 1½ t. salt, ½ t. pepper, allspice, star anise, and cinnamon. Whisk in 2 T. oil. Rub mixture onto both sides of each venison loin. Put prunes in a bowl.

If using cognac, pour over prunes and set aside to soak. Preheat oven to 350°F.

In a sauté pan, heat 2 T. oil and 2 T. butter. Add squash and cook, stirring frequently, 15–18 minutes. Toss in prunes. Remove pan from heat and season generously with salt and pepper. Remove squash-prune mixture from pan and keep warm.

Heat at medium-high 2 T. each of oil and butter in a small ovenproof pan. When butter starts to sizzle and foam, add venison loins and sear for 1 minute. Turn them over and transfer pan to the oven. Roast until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the center of a loin reads 130°F for medium rare. Remove pan from oven and transfer venison to a board. Let rest 3-4 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat original squash pan over medium-high heat. Add remaining 2 T. butter and cook 1 minute until it starts to brown and foam. Remove pan from heat and stir in sage leaves. When they get crispy, scoop them out and set aside.

Divide squash-prune mixture evenly among dinner plates. Top each portion with a venison loin, a drizzle of brown butter, and a sprinkle of crisped sage. ■