

Venison Pastrami

By David Schmetterling | Preparation time: 17 days | Cooking time: 6 hours



Many game cooks are familiar with venison sausage. But few explore other types of charcuterie, a branch of cooking that produces a wide variety of delicious foods. Charcuterie (*shar-KU-tuh-ree*) was originally devised to preserve meat before refrigeration was invented. Today these meats—including ham, pâté, bacon, and confit—are prepared mainly for their taste. One of my favorites is venison pastrami.

Pastrami is just a corned roast (think corned beef) covered in coriander and pepper and then smoked. “Corning” has nothing to do with grain corn. It refers to a coarse salt—the large grains of which were known as “corns” in medieval Britain—and the brine that preserves the meat.

A conventional beef pastrami is made with a fatty, inexpensive cut such as the plate or brisket (both from the lower front of the cow). Because venison lacks marbled fat, use a lean cut such as a sirloin or other roast from the hindquarter. Venison neck meat, shanks, or shoulder roasts don’t make good pastrami.

The traditional way to use pastrami is for sandwiches, especially the Reuben. Along with a mountain of thinly sliced pastrami, a Reuben includes Swiss cheese, Russian dressing, and drained sauerkraut on dark rye bread. It’s served warm.

Pastrami is slow food. It takes more than two weeks to make, though most of the time the meat sits in your refrigerator. Just like you can’t hurry love, you can’t speed up the curing process of a good pastrami. 🐾

—David Schmetterling coordinates the FWP Fisheries Research Program.

BRINE

- 1 gallon water
- 1 c. sugar
- ½ c. (packed) dark brown sugar
- ¼ c. honey
- 1½ c. kosher salt
- 8 t. Instacure #1 (aka, pink curing salt) or Prague powder #1
- 1 T. pickling spice
- 5–7 cloves of garlic, minced

PASTRAMI

- 2–5 lb. lean venison roast
- 2 T. peppercorn, ground
- 2 T. coriander, ground

DIRECTIONS

In a stock pot large enough to hold the brine and the roast, add a gallon of water and all the brine ingredients. Bring to a boil on the stovetop, stir, then remove from heat.

Cool brine to room temperature. Refrigerate 1 hour to chill.

Submerge roast completely in brine. Place a dinner plate on the roast to keep it submerged.

After 15 days in the refrigerator, remove roast from brine, rinse in cold water, and pat dry. At this point, the roast is “corned.”

Set on a rack in the refrigerator for 2 days to dry and form a pellicle, the thin, tacky film that holds the smoke flavor.

Grind the coriander and peppercorns and roll the roast in the mixture to completely cover.

Place roast in smoker and smoke with a mixture of cherry and hickory for a total of 6 hours: Start at 180° F. for 2 hours, then 190° for 2 hours, and 200° until the internal temperature reaches 150°. (Note: Beef pastrami is “cold smoked,” below 140°, to provide a rich, heavy smoke, but that process makes venison too smoky and overwhelms the other flavors.)

Remove from smoker and allow to cool to room temperature on a rack.

Note: Pastrami doesn’t freeze well, but it keeps in the refrigerator for a couple of weeks. I never have trouble polishing it off before then.

The Reuben’s origins

One story holds that the popular sandwich was invented in the 1920s by Reuben Kulakofsky, a grocer in Omaha, Nebraska.

Another is that Arnold Reuben, owner of the famed

Reuben’s Restaurant and Delicatessen in New York City, created the sandwich around 1915.

