

Leave no trace

By Tom Dickson

You should go hunting more often! I can think of no words that bring more joy to a hunter's heart. Which is why I consider myself so lucky that my wife says or implies such sentiments each year while eating one of the many game dinners I prepare—and she's not just trying to get me out of the house!

The game meat itself deserves much of the credit. It's delicious, organic, and free range, harvested as humanely as possible. If you enjoy meat, it's hard to find a more sustainable source than a wild deer, pronghorn, grouse, or goose.

And I definitely work hard preparing delicious dishes. Though I'm not a trained chef, I realized early on that if I wanted Lisa to partake of my autumnal harvest, I'd better ensure that each meal was not just edible but irresistible. I'd grown up with the “add a can

of cream of mushroom soup” or “pan fry until well done” approaches to game cooking. That never appealed to me, and I knew it wouldn't to her. So I bought cookbooks and went online to learn all I could about cooking game, from American, British, and European experts.

But I'm convinced the most important reason my once-vegetarian wife now enjoys eating wild animals is that I erase all trace of their origins.

This occurred to me during the first November we lived together. After shooting a whitetail one Sunday morning and hanging it in the basement, I called Lisa down to show off my prize. “Look!” I said, indicating where the bullet had entered at the deer's left armpit, then passed through its heart, then exited through the right shoulder, shattering the scapula.

Lisa gave me a disapproving look. “Thanks, but I really don't want an anatomy lesson with my food,” she said, heading back upstairs.

I realized then that while hunters may marvel at the remarkable conversion of animals into meals—how a mallard that yesterday left an Alberta pothole can tomorrow evening be Roast Duck with Apricot Glaze served in a Helena dining room—everyone else prefers their meat to be clean of hair, feathers, blood, and backstory.

I get it. When I buy lamb chops, the last thing I want to see is wool stuck to the meat or read details of the young sheep's demise.

Since then, I've spared my wife all evidence of our game-dinner origins. I might show off the occasional fully feathered rooster pheasant I bring home, just because it's so beautiful, but only if the bird is fully intact.

Otherwise, I do all my butchering when she's gone, at the basement sink. Afterward, I vacuum up every remaining feather or hair. Then, with hot, soapy water, I wash away all traces of viscera, slime, and fat, getting down on my hands and knees to wipe up stray drops of blood. My goal is that, when Lisa returns, she won't see a single speck of gore that just a few hours earlier covered my work area.

Things stay clean and tidy during packaging, too. I trim all fat, sinew, and silverskin from each steak, chop, and roast, wrap the meat tightly in plastic wrap and white butcher paper, and seal it with freezer tape. Each package looks just like it came from our local grocer's meat department.

Some may think I'm contributing to the problem of people not knowing where their food comes from. Maybe so. But if my immaculate approach to butchering and packaging means Lisa and I continue to enjoy meals of game together, and that she actually urges me to hunt more often—every hunter's dream!—I'll promote game meat's illusion over its reality any day. 🐾

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