

Thanks for giving

By Tom Dickson

When most hunters talk to each other about hunting, they discuss the firearms and ammo, the physical challenge, or the antler size of the big buck or bull they dream of shooting.

I focus mainly on the meat.

Sure, I'm interested in all that other stuff. But I'm primarily out there for late-season mallards on the grill, wine-braised deer shanks, and sautéed pheasant breasts topped with a gin-infused cream sauce.

My focus on food may come from taking up hunting later in life. I'd done some small game and duck hunting in my teens and 20s, but I didn't try to shoot a deer until I was 39. I wanted venison, which I'd read was deli-

Tom Dickson is the Montana Outdoors editor.

cious but had never had the chance to try. One bite of that acorn-fed Wisconsin white-tail doe and I was a changed man.

Since then, I've been lucky to fill my small standup freezer each fall with a deer or two, several ducks and pheasants, a few sharptails, and the occasional Canada goose. It's a great feeling, looking at those white paper-wrapped packets of frozen meat and knowing I've provided for my family for another year.

I'm thankful for all that meat—and for all the fun I have hunting it.

Several years ago, an FWP colleague tallied how much venison is harvested by hunters in Montana each year. He multiplied the average weight of meat produced per animal by the average hunter harvest and

came up with a total of 9.3 million pounds of venison (elk, deer, and pronghorn).

Elk produced the most wild meat (4.6 million pounds), followed by white-tailed deer (2.3 million pounds), mule deer (2.1 million pounds), and pronghorn (350,000 pounds).

That's a mountain of meat.

Compared to beef, which ranges from an average of \$6 per pound for a standard roast to \$20 per pound for organic, grass-fed beef, those 9.3 million pounds of wild meat are worth \$56 million to \$186 million.

For a hunter who harvests a buck that yields, say, 60 pounds of boneless venison, that's \$360 to \$1,800 worth of meat. When priced the same as farm-raised venison, which runs about \$40 per pound, the meat of that single buck is worth around \$2,400.

For an elk, multiply those figures by three or four.

The significance of all this meat goes beyond hunters not having to buy the equivalent amount of beef or pork, savings important to a lot of families. Game meat is organic, low in saturated fat, and the very definition of free range. It checks all the boxes for ideal meat in terms of health, the environment, and animal welfare.

Here at *Montana Outdoors*, we've done all we can to help others make the most of their harvest, publishing and listing online dozens of recipes that allow anyone to prepare delectable dishes (fwp.mt.gov/montana-outdoors/recipes). One reason is to reduce the emphasis on trophies and limits, which the nonhunting majority of Americans finds distasteful.

I've often heard that after a successful bison hunt, Native American hunters thank the buffalo for giving itself up to them. What a wonderful gesture of respect and gratitude.

In that same spirit, I want to express my thanks this holiday season to all the game animals that gave themselves up to me during my days afield. I promise to appreciate and savor every bite. 🐾

