

October 5: Wild Eats- Venison- Cooking for Safety and Flavors

October is here and the 2021 deer season has begun. It's a time with opportunity to fulfill another tag and to fill their freezer with quality, versatile protein. If done properly, taking deer from field to home can be an economical food source.

Food safety should be at the forefront of all hunters' minds, beginning in the field up until it's time to cook the game. It's important to properly field dress a deer and cool the inner cavity as soon as possible. While aging, a deer should be kept below 40°F and the plan for how all meat will be stored should be decided. Fresh deer meat can be refrigerated, frozen, made into jerky, or made shelf stable using home food preservation techniques.

As with commercially sold meat, cooking game meats to safe internal temperature reduces your risk of contracting a foodborne illness. Safe cooking temperatures vary between cuts of venison. With food safety in mind, whole cuts like steak or roasts should be cooked to a minimum internal temperature of 145°F (medium rare), ground venison should reach a minimum of 160°F, and any venison incorporated in soups, stews, casserole, or leftovers should be heated/reheated to a minimum of 165°F. The use of a food thermometer is the only guaranteed way to know whether meat has reached the appropriate temperature. It's not always accurate to judge how done a dish is by the change in its color. For example; the chemical reactions that occur between meat and onions while cooking prevents the meat from completely browning. The meat remains somewhat pink even after reaching a safe internal temperature.

The taste of venison can be enhanced by tenderizing, adding spices, and with use of marinades. Marinades contain acidic liquid that help to break down muscle tissue and enhance mouth-feel. Example marinades include: French or Italian dressing, tomato sauce or juice, lemon or pineapple juice, or mixture of vinegar, water, and sugar. Meat can sit in marinade anywhere from 1-24 hours with an ideal time of 8-24 hours. When left in marinade longer the 24 hours, the muscle breaks down too much and loses its quality.

Game meat is ideally served very hot or very cold, cooked low and slow without going above 375°F, or hot and fast when pan frying or grilling. Different cuts of meat are better ingredients for some dishes than others. Rump, round and shoulder cuts are tougher while rib and loin are more tender. Tougher cuts provide best results when cooked slowly and used as roast, in stews, ground into sausage, or made into jerky. Ribs and loins can be oven roasted, broiled, grilled, or fried. If processing at home, keep your steaks $\frac{3}{4}$ inch or less to help with the hot and fast cooking process.

Nutritionally, ground deer meat contains less calories and more protein than the same portion or 85% lean ground beef. A 3-ounce portion of venison also provides more magnesium, phosphorous, potassium than an equal portion of ground beef. Incorporating game meat into your protein rotation can help increase the variety of flavor and nutrients into your routine.