

THE SENSE-IBLE HUNTER

Whether you're trying to spot wildlife more clearly on a hunt or tantalize taste buds at the dinner table, here's how to satisfy your senses. BY LISA BALLARD



WORD WISE

The word "venison" is derived from the Latin word *venari* (to hunt or to pursue) and originally described the meat of any game animal. Today, "venison" refers to not only deer meat but other hoofed game animals, including elk and antelope.

IT'S A FACT

Venison is good for your waistline. A 4-ounce serving of venison contains 3 grams of fat, compared with 9 grams of fat in the same serving of beef flank steak. Beef also has about three times more cholesterol and calories than venison.

TASTING IT. Handle meat properly from field to table to avoid gamey flavor.

It's easier to motivate friends and family to go hunting if what they harvest is delicious to eat. Hank Shaw, the award-winning author of such field-to-table books as *Hunt, Gather, Cook: Finding the Forgotten Feast* and *Buck, Buck, Moose: Recipes and Techniques for Cooking Deer, Elk, Moose, Antelope and Other Antlered Things*, offers this advice on how to turn wild meat into a gourmet meal.

1. **Shoot something young after the rut.** Old animals and bucks during the rut taste stronger.
2. **Chill it quickly.** Warm meat spoils faster. "Get the hide off big game," say Shaw. "The hide holds in heat. Conversely, with grouse or pheasants, leave it in the feathers — otherwise

the skin will dry out and you can't eat it."

3. **Keep it cold.** Shaw recommends hanging meat in a location, preferably a walk-in cooler, no warmer than 45 degrees for deer, 50 degrees for birds.
4. **Wait at least 48 hours to butcher it.** If you can't process game within an hour or two of shooting it, you need to wait until after Rigor mortis is complete. If you don't, the meat will be tough due to a process called "shortening" in which muscle contracts when cut off bone.
5. **Pat it dry before packaging it.** "Water expands when it freezes," explains Shaw, who prefers vacuum sealing over simply wrapping meat in freezer paper. "Wet meat is more likely to break the seal on its packaging when it freezes."

6. **Freeze it fast.** "Like us, animals are mostly liquid," says Shaw. "The faster meat freezes, the smaller the ice crystals, so there's very little moisture loss. A box freezer that already contains a lot of frozen meat works best. It's like surrounding the new meat with cold air and ice cubes."

When you take game out of the freezer, it's time to slow down. Shaw brines wild pigs, upland birds, wild turkeys, and sea ducks before cooking them, which helps hold in moisture as the meat cooks. When heating wild meat, it's easy to overcook it if you rush or simply rely on your beef or chicken recipes.

"Cook wild meat slow and low!" says Shaw, urging patience and a low cooking temperature compared with domestic meats. "Your pheasant will be dry if you cook it like a Butterball.®"