

THE GIFT OF VENISON

By Jim Heffelfinger

Humans have eaten meat since the very beginning of their humanness. Not only has it been important as a source of nutrition, but it has served as an important centerpiece in our social interactions. The high protein diet that meat provided has been credited for fueling our disproportionate brain size and superior intelligence. The complex communication, collaboration and planning needed to successfully hunt animals probably helped develop a complicated language and our ability to think abstractly. Early societies were based on some individuals hunting and some gathering food resources and then sharing what they had for a diverse diet. This social structure centered around getting meat to the table.

Humans have certainly eaten meat from a lot of different kinds of animals through the millennia - many of them now extinct. Deer worldwide have been an important source of wild meat throughout most of our history. Today, members of the deer family are the most important contributors of wild meat to the human diet. It is actually surprising that Eve tempted Adam with a piece of fruit and not a deer hindquarter in the Garden of Eden.

THE OTHER RED MEAT

It is not surprising that venison is so sought-after. Of all the meats we eat, venison in particular is increasing in popularity because of the trend toward a healthier diet, lower in saturated fats and without a lot of preservatives and artificial growth additives.

Deer meat is healthier in so many ways. Venison surpasses beef in the amount of important vitamins and minerals, but is lower in saturated fat and total calories. High protein venison has 1/3 the cholesterol as beef, is high in Omega-3 fatty acids (that's the good one), and contains all 10 essential amino acids that are responsible for important chemical reactions in your body.

Those experienced in properly taking care of their meat from the field to the table enjoy great tasting meat. Those complaining of a "gamey" taste are doing it wrong. If game meat like venison is kept free of contaminants, cooled quickly, and processed in a timely way it will not taste gamey. It will, however, taste different than beef, pork and chicken. Some people expect it to taste identical to beef and any deviation from that draws a comment about a "wild" taste. The truth is, they are wild and different so we shouldn't expect it to taste like a domestic animal of a different species.

We are starting to see more mention and use of wild game and venison on the various cooking shows that populate the food networks these days. Everyone is waking up to the benefits of eating venison that we all have known our whole lives. The "Paleo-diet" fad focuses on a diet a cave man would have eaten and wild venison is a highly prized component for those who can get their hands on some. Even those categorizing themselves as non-hunting "environmentalists" are becoming interested in the benefits of eating natural meat harvested from nature. No factory was used to process the meat, no fossil fuel was used to truck it across the country, and animals lived free and wild until they were harvested.

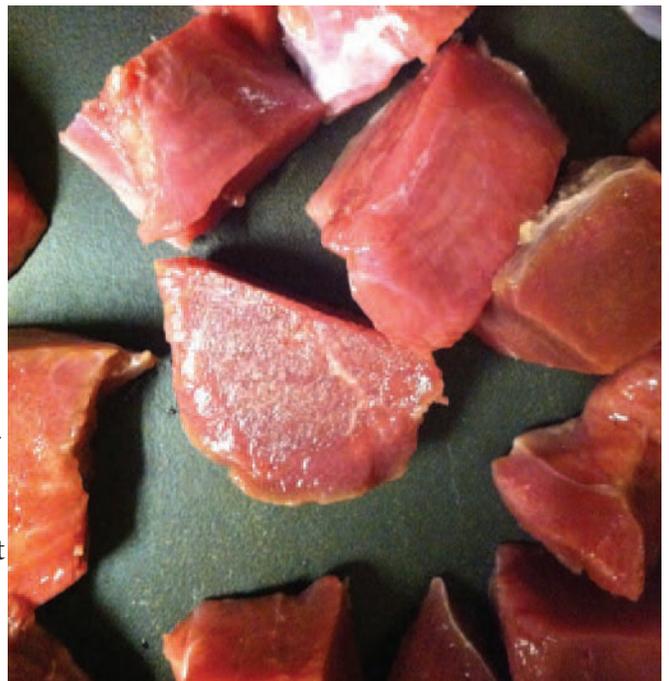


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From an environmentalist's point of view, what's not to like? The problem (for them) is that they cannot buy this precious commodity in the local store at any price. Venison has to be earned. It has to be located in the wild, stalked, killed, and butchered by a skilled person and then given -- not sold -- to them. The gifting of hard-won venison has been part of human culture since before written time. Successful cavemen undoubtedly gave meat to the elderly and less skilled in their community. We don't have a record of those transactions, but we do have a rich history of the importance of venison starting in the Medieval Period of Europe and continuing uninterrupted to the present.

MEDIEVAL MEAT

During the Medieval Period in western Europe, venison took on a very special importance in society. Under the rule of the Norman Kings, a Forest Law was established allowing the King to designate any area as Royal Forest with strict laws against the killing or collection of deer or vegetation. Laws also prohibited venison from being sold. Venison represented a special commodity that only the rich and influential had access to. Because of this, venison was much more than protein, it was an obvious symbol of the ruling elite. It became a way for those important enough to have venison to show others they respected them enough to present such a special gift.

The gift of venison might come in the form of an invite to hunt, or several quarters delivered to an estate, an invitation to a celebratory feast, or even live-captured deer in wooden crates to be released elsewhere. As a good illustration of the value and prestige of venison, there are written records of guests complaining that other meat (pork and beef) were being passed off as venison to the guests (who knew the difference and were not impressed). Beef and pork could be purchased anywhere, but venison was special. Although today we celebrate the leanness of venison and lack of fatty marbling, in Medieval times fat was desired and relished. Deer were hunted specifically during times of peak fat which they referred to as being "in grease." Males were hunted in the month prior to rut before they "ran off" their fat reserves, and females were mostly hunted in late fall after having a chance to fatted up.

Because of the high value of venison, it became a way to show social leadership and to strengthen social connections in the community. If you were important enough to be given venison then you were known and respected by someone important. As politics became a more important part of Medieval society, the records show that gifts of venison became more common around political election time! According to John Fletcher, in his book "Gardens of Earthly Delight," the Duke of Norfolk gave away 75 deer in the year 1515; with most going to 16 knights, 5 priors, 5 lords, and other local dignitary.

Although people of that era were commercializing everything, they did not dare extend that to deer meat. Having venison available to all in the open market would have devalued this important social symbol of wealth and power among the elite. Another reason for not allowing the sale of venison is that making it profitable would certainly encourage poaching. Poaching was already well-documented in more than just the familiar tale of "Robin Hood." He was taking from the rich and giving to the poor, but he wasn't shooting bags of coins with that bow.

Ample court records show that the peasants did not have the same aversion to selling venison; they were always scraping to get by and additional venison in the stew pot or money from poached deer was a welcomed addition. If caught by the forest officer, poachers sometimes were successful in bribery by simply splitting the deer with him. Because venison was such a special treat there was reportedly an increase in poaching immediately before major feasts or holidays like Christmas.

To the modern taste buds, deer fat is not desirable because it has a higher melting point and can feel "pasty" in the mouth when it reaches room temperature. If washed down with a cold drink, it might feel decidedly waxy. There were no freezers or meat lockers in those days and so venison was usually salted and sometimes smoked

before being packed in barrels for storage or transportation. The natural leanness of venison helped keep the meat from becoming rancid. recipes of the day frequently called for a vinegar marinade, which may have been more for disinfecting the meat under Medieval conditions than it was to flavor or tenderize it. Interestingly, many of the present-day sour meat dishes in European cooking (like sauerbraten) may originate from the fact that Medieval kitchens used a lot of vinegar.

Throughout later British and European history, venison continued to be an important commodity to gift to others or flaunt apparent wealth. The upper class who had access to deer continued to invite friends of favor to come hunt or partake in a feast that included venison as its centerpiece. Meanwhile, in North America, Native American tribes revered venison in much the same way - by sharing and gifting this valuable commodity among their community. Those with venison were skilled enough to obtain it and those on the receiving end of a gift were honored. To this day, many tribes favor venison over beef because they know it is healthier, harder to obtain, and holds special cultural meanings. A friend who is Navajo sometimes donates venison to members of certain Pueblo Tribes. His gifts are immediately met with insistent return gifts of Pueblo bread, tamales, burritos or fresh corn. The value of venison and the practice of bartering has deep cultural roots going back father than we can document.

IMPORTANCE OF VENISON TODAY

Human dimensions research shows that there are 4 main reasons people hunt today: to be close to nature, to be with family and friends, for recreation, and for the meat. Everyone can claim some allegiance to all of these, but probably in different percentages. For my family, having a pile of packages of white butcher paper in our freezer is an important motivator. We have a household trophy criteria that my 4 boys are expected to adhere to: "If it's legal game and big enough to fit in a tortilla, it goes home with us." Last December we put 4 Texas whitetails and 3 hogs in the freezer and only 20% of it remained last week when we added 2 mule deer from the Kaibab Plateau in Arizona. We do not buy beef unless we run out of venison burger prematurely. For many families like ours, having healthy meat is an important byproduct -- if not the primary reason -- for hunting.

Venison is still very commonly "gifted" to those who don't have access to it. With our increasingly urban society there are many families that grew up with venison in the kitchen, but no longer have hunters in the household. These people (especially the older generation) greatly appreciate presents gift wrapped in butcher paper from hunting acquaintances. It is not uncommon for ranchers and farmers to receive venison as tokens of appreciation for being able to hunt their private land.

Besides individual person-to-person donations of venison across the country, there is a widespread and more significant "venison gifting" going on. A multitude of similar organizations exemplified by the popular "Hunters for the Hungry" have established a structured donation system where hunters can donate meat to homeless shelters who use it to feed the hungry. These organizations have been hugely successful and show yet one more societal benefit of regulated hunting that goes beyond wildlife management and conservation. For example, in the 2012-13 season 2.2 million pounds of venison were donated nationwide and that allowed organizations to serve 8.8 million meals to needy people everywhere. Hunters in Texas alone provided more than a half million meals that year to homeless and needy persons.

There is an interesting and growing segment of urban society that has no hunters in their family in recent generations and no exposure to hunting, but seeks wild game meat for all the health benefits mentioned previously. This recent trend is called the "Locavore Movement," the name is derived from those who want to eat foods obtained locally with minimal processing. This often means wild animals. The concept of harvesting your own vegetables easily translates over to meat. I personally have friends and coworkers who have taken up hunting for the first time as adults solely to harvest their own meat. These are the people who simply got tired of waiting for hunters to harvest meat for them and decided to get their own. I applaud this Do-it-Yourself attitude and consider these people to be some of the best ambassadors of our hunting heritage.

A GIFT OF A DEER

If we had written records before the Medieval Period they would undoubtedly document the special importance that has always been associated with deer meat. As written word became more common, wild deer became less

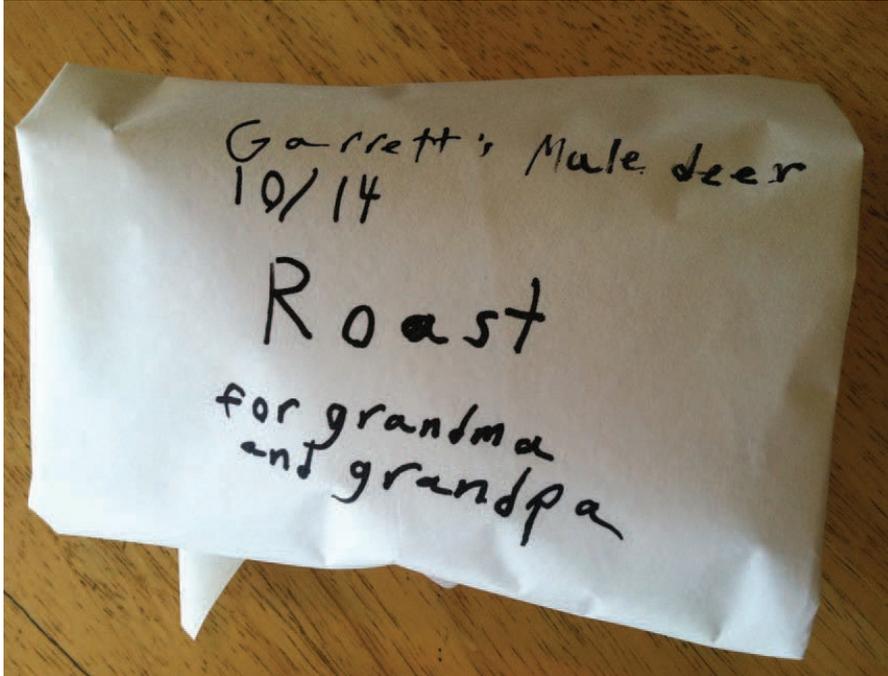


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so because of the lack of protection and absence of a structured system of wildlife management. This trend of decreasing deer abundance only increased the value of venison in societies around the globe. Even with the abundance, and over-abundance, of deer today the historical reverence for venison remains.

Interestingly, selling venison was outlawed or taboo in some societies through history. This was strictly enforced in Europe in Medieval times by the ruling elite to protect against poaching and probably to perpetuate their control of accessible venison. The prohibition against selling venison continued through the centuries and eventually (after a brief lapse) became one of the foundational pillars of how wildlife is managed in North America. Recently, that pillar is being shaken a little as some members of the wildlife profession have been talking about whether we should commercialize the sale of venison to control locally overpopulation white-tailed deer herds.

Hunters have always enjoyed the opportunity to sit down and share their bounty with family and friends or bring summer sausage and jerky to share with nonhunting coworkers. However, few people realize the historical and social significance of these actions. The importance of venison throughout human history is not only in the obvious nutritional gains, but also because it formed an important commodity that served to connect society across different social and economic classes. Each meal of venison should be enjoyed with an appreciation of this gift from our ancestors. We are truly feasting like Kings!

Editors note: Jim Heffelfinger completed a Masters Degree at Texas A&M-Kingsville and then worked on the Rio Paisano Ranch (Brooks/Kleberg Co.) as Manager of Wildlife Operations. He is now adjunct faculty at University of Arizona, Professional Member of the Boone & Crockett Club, Chair of the western states Mule Deer Working Group, and a game biologist for the Arizona Game & Fish Department. See WWW.DEERNUT.COM to purchase his book "Deer of the Southwest" published by Texas A&M University Press or follow him on Twitter: @GameTrax or Facebook: Jackrabbit Jim.