

Think your venison's too gamey? This chef says you're not cooking it right

By **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

PITTSBURGH — Dave Racicot has been a deer hunter longer than he's been a professional chef, which is to say: a very long time.

The Indiana, Pennsylvania, native was around 10 when he starting hunting with his maternal grandfather, Joseph Farine. He quickly discovered it can be pretty boring sitting in a stand for hours at a time, patiently and quietly waiting for a buck or doe to wander within sight.

"I went every year with Pap," recalls Racicot, 43, who's been executive chef at The Commoner restaurant in Hotel Monaco, Downtown, since 2019. "And it was always boring, cold and wet."

What made it worth it was the fact the family got to eat venison whenever someone was fortunate enough to harvest a deer.

"Everyone who says they hate it or don't like it, it's been overcooked."

"It just tastes so good," he says of the meat, which, depending on the cut, was roasted, dried into jerky, stuffed into sausage or turned into a spicy, hearty chili.

Racicot continued that tradition when he grew up and switched to archery hunting, which he says is more challenging, emotional and intimate than hunting with a gun. "If I didn't enjoy eating [deer meat], I wouldn't do it," he says. While he has yet to harvest a deer this year, he still has plenty of venison in a deep freezer in his Oakmont basement from previous years, all of which he processed himself from start to finish. He has some in the fridge in his garage too.

Not a fan of venison? You're not alone. Deservedly or not, deer meat has something of a bad rap outside of the hunting community.

Racicot has heard the reasons why a thousand times, and shakes his head every time: It's too dry! It tastes gamey! It's not safe to eat!

Actually, says the chef who has cooked at Nema-colin Woodlands Resort's Lautrec, Notion and Poulet Bleu, if your venison dish tastes lousy, well, it's because you're not cooking it right.

"Everyone who says they hate it or don't like it, it's been overcooked," he says. But serve it rare to medium, and "it's amazing."

Rich in iron and full of B vitamins, venison is lower in fat and calories than beef. Because it's so lean, and fat protects against inexperienced cooking, it's pretty easy to overcook and dry it out. In addition, poorly processed meat just won't taste good. Deer can only hang in coolers for a limited time before spoilage begins, and this year's shortage of processors means some hunters may end up butchering their deer themselves, even if they don't know how.

To create a winning dish, you not only need to cook it properly — hot and fast for tender cuts like steaks and chops, and low and slow for the tougher round or shoulder — but also make sure you procure it from a trusted source.

In Pennsylvania, it's illegal to sell deer meat unless it's farm-raised and



Steve Mellon/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-TNS
Venison prepared by Dave Racicot, executive chef at The Commoner restaurant in Hotel Monaco in Pittsburgh.

inspected. But the good news is, even if you aren't friends with a generous hunter, venison is fairly easy to find around here.

It will, however, come from a farm instead of the woods, and it likely won't be the white-tailed species you see in Pennsylvania's woods. Most retail venison, including that from Highbourne Deer Farms in Dallastown, York County, comes from red deer raised on pasture, grain and hay.

It generally costs a bit more than beef. Strip District Meats sells ground venison from New Zealand for \$11.99 per pound. The store also has venison bistro filets (\$62.99 for 3 pounds), venison medallions (\$27.99 for four 4-ounce medallions), venison tenderloins (\$55.99) and a venison Frenched rack (\$78.99). All are vacuum-packed and frozen.

You also can purchase it online or by mail order through retailers such as Whole Foods, Cabela's and D'Artagnan.

Its relatively high price is why you don't often find venison on restaurant menus, says Racicot. It can easily run \$48 a pound, with fine dining places often charging upwards of \$42 for a prepared 5-ounce portion, "which is a really small piece of meat," he says. "So it's difficult."

To drive home how easy it is to cook a piece of venison well, Racicot recently prepared a 6-ounce tenderloin from his private stash in The Commoner's commercial kitchen.

After covering the steak with a very generous amount of salt — a lot of it falls off in the pan, he explains — he crushes a couple cloves of garlic on the stainless-steel counter with the palm of his hand, peels it and sets it aside with a small bundle of fresh thyme and half a sliced shallot.

Placing a small carbon steel skillet on the burner over high heat (you can use any thick pan you're comfortable with), he pours in 3 tablespoons of grapeseed oil, a neutral oil prized for its high smoke point. When the oil sizzles and emits a slight whiff of smoke, he places the tenderloin in the pan.

"You want it hot and fast initially," he says. After about 2 minutes, he turns the steak over, adds 3 tablespoons of butter and immediately turns down the heat. After the butter melts into the oil, he adds garlic, shallot and thyme, and starts spooning the fragrant, sizzling liquid over the steak again and again.

"This is where the cooking process happens," he says. While it's not necessary, basting allows the meat to cook faster and more evenly.

Four minutes later, when the steak is a golden,

caramel brown, the chef declares it done. The entire kitchen smells terrific.

After letting the meat rest for at least 4 minutes — 133-135 degrees is right for mid-rare to medium — he slices it across the grain, plates it with the aromatics and spoons a simple huckleberry gastrique on top.

"The longer you let it sit without it getting cold, the better," he notes. A taste reveals Racicot is on the money: While you can tell you're not eating beef, it doesn't taste gamey, just distinctive in a good way.

When he cooks venison at home for his wife, Kelly, Racicot typically prepares it with winter spices and roasted root vegetables because "it just makes sense." It's a little more upscale served on the job, with braised red cabbage, caramelized apples and sauces made with beets and juniper berries.

"See?" he says with a smile after a reporter takes two bites. "It's good!"

VENISON CHILI

"This recipe works well, it's easy to make and any number of substitutions can be made and it's still tasty," Racicot says. He likes to garnish it with cheese and sour cream, with some crusty bread or oyster crackers on the side. Cocoa powder adds to its depth and richness.

3 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup diced onion
1 cup diced peppers
1 habanero (optional)
6 cloves garlic, smashed and chopped
3 tablespoons chili powder
1 ½ tablespoon cumin
¼ tablespoon cayenne
½ tablespoon cinnamon
2 pounds ground venison
12 ounces beer (Iron City, of course)
24-ounce can chopped tomatoes
6 ounces tomato paste
15-ounce can kidney beans, optional
¼ cup cocoa powder
Salt, to taste
Shredded cheese, scallions and sour cream, for serving

Add oil to large, heavy-bottomed pan set over moderate heat. Add onion, peppers and habanero (if using) and cook until peppers are tender, 7-10 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds, then add spices and venison. Cook, breaking meat up with a spoon, until it's no longer pink, about 5 minutes.

Add beer, chopped tomatoes, tomato paste and kidney beans (if using) and stir well. Add cocoa powder and stir well to combine, then season with salt.

Reduce heat to low and cook chili for a few hours, stirring occasionally as it thickens.

Serve hot in a bowl with whatever garnish you like.

— Chef David Racicot, The Commoner

BAKERS

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Transfer to a lightly floured surface and form dough into a 7-inch round. Cut the circle in half, then cut each half into 4 pie-shaped wedges. Place the scones on the baking sheet. Brush tops with a little milk or egg wash.

Bake 18 to 20 minutes or until golden brown. A toothpick will come out clean.

The scones are always best the day they are baked. They can freeze well for one month.

New recipe for honey pudding delights Thanksgiving guests

Even with all the baking she does at the bakery and her home during the holidays, Jenny Voll can't help but try new recipes this time of year, especially when they come so highly recommended by one of her employees.

"One of our newer employees — we had a potluck and she brought this in," said Voll, manager of the Golden Delight bakery in Gahanna. "She'd been talking about it for months. We all went crazy for it. I've already made it two times and my sister has made it, too."

The honey pudding definitely lived up to the hype.

All 10 people Voll hosted for Thanksgiving loved the dish and it's already on the menu for Christmas festivities, but she said she'll most likely double the recipe then.

"One time around for everybody is just not enough," she said with a laugh.

The recipe is pretty simple, especially for a homemade pudding, as it just requires constant stirring and making sure the consistency is right. Voll recommends making sure the mixture thickens on the stove and if it's still a little watery, bakers can add a little more cornstarch.

Plus, she said the sweet honey flavoring is a great addition to the holidays.

"It goes well with Christmas," she said. "I feel like the honey pudding is very comforting."

She added that it could be used as a topping on cake or ice cream, but her family prefers it by itself.

"We really like honey in our family — it's a natural sweetener," she said. "When we travel, we like to try to pick up different honeys."

The cookbook the recipe comes from — "The Elder Scrolls: The Official Cookbook" by Chelsea Monroe-Casse — says the taste can vary slightly depending on what kind of honey is used.

Voll said she enjoys the creaminess and although the pudding needs to be refrigerated to harden, she definitely sneaks a few bites while it's still warm.

"Pudding is a nice

change of pace this time of year," Voll said. "You can only eat so much pie."

HONEY PUDDING

Makes 4 servings

2 cups whole milk
1 whole vanilla bean, or
1 teaspoon extract
½ cup honey
1 cup heavy cream or whipping cream
3 tablespoons cornstarch
3 egg yolks
Pinch salt

Pour the milk into a medium pot over medium heat. Split the vanilla bean down the middle with a sharp knife and scrape out the seeds. Add the seeds and the pod to the pot of milk, and bring to just under a boil. If using vanilla extract, just pour it in. Add the honey and stir for a few minutes to allow the vanilla to steep into the milk. Fish out the pod, scrape any remaining seeds from it and discard.

In a separate bowl, whisk together the heavy cream, cornstarch, egg yolks and salt. While still whisking, pour a little of the hot milk into the bowl to temper the mixture, then pour everything into the pot. Cook for about five minutes more, stirring all the while, until the mixture has thickened noticeably. Remove from heat, strain into a clean bowl, and cover with plastic. Chill for at least an hour to help the pudding set.

Customers wait all year for beautiful, puffy springerle

The requests for the Original Goodie Shop's springerle start coming long before Thanksgiving, even though Debbie Smith and her two daughters make them only during the holiday season.

However, people are more than willing to wait for them.

"They're something people seek out," said Smith, whose father bought the Upper Arlington bakery in 1967. "People come in asking for them because they can't find them anywhere else."

She's not sure where the recipe came from — whether her father got it from the man he bought the shop from, his mother or somewhere else — for the anise-flavored German cookies.

All Smith knows is they are a favorite of her family and customers, alike.

She suspects it's because they have an embossed design on them created by a resin press (usually featuring depictions of olden days, such as gristmills or flowers), making them unique.

But it also could be

their fluffiness as they "poof up like a pillow" in the oven. In fact, they are called springerle after the German word for "jump."

"Some people like to dry them out and dunk them in coffee, others eat them right out of the oven," Smith said. "My mother always sat them out for a week before she ate them."

She said that although the recipe is fairly simple, the cookies can be time-consuming because bakers have to let them sit for 24 hours for the imprint to set and then, they're baked in a low temperature oven.

As far as the press goes, people can buy them at a few online shops. (Smith knows as she sadly had to replace her decades-old one in 2009 after it went missing.)

She and her daughters are always thrilled to pull out that press each holiday season.

"I just saw a lady in here who said, 'I've been buying these for 50 years,'" Smith said. "Food and goodies are some of our favorite things this time of year and they're linked to memories.

Like you eat Grandma's cookies and it takes you right back to that kitchen. Those things do make you happy."

GERMAN SPRINGERLE

Makes 150 cookies

1 pound, 12 ounces whole egg (roughly 14 eggs)
3 pounds, 4 ounces granulated sugar
½ ounce salt
6 ounces powdered sugar
¼ ounce ammonia bicarbonate
15 drops anise oil
¾ ounce anise (½ ground, ½ seeds)
2 pounds pastry flour
3 pounds cake flour

Heat oven to 335 degrees.

Whip eggs, sugar and salt in a large bowl. Then, incorporate powdered sugar, ammonia bicarbonate, anise oil, ground anise and anise seeds into whipped mixture.

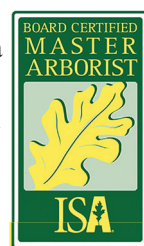
Sieve the flours into a large bowl. Add whipped mixture to the sieved flour and mix by hand.

Flour your surface or baking sheet and place dough on top. Cover with a damp cloth.

Roll dough in workable amounts to about ½-inch-thick. Imprint with your springerle press. Cut the cookies. If the dough gets too stiff, mist with water and knead.

Let the cut cookies rest, uncovered, for at least 6 hours or up to a day.

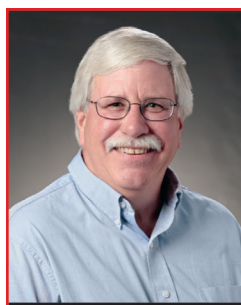
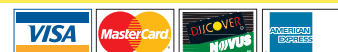
Bake at 335 with door cracked open for 30 minutes. Then check for golden bottoms.



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