
PECONIC FORAGER

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

THE HAMPTONS VENISON COMPANY

What would it take to cultivate the forbidden flavor of game?

A Noyac resident who is an avid fisherman and experienced hunter recently saw a deer hit by the car in front of him. He pulled over and found the animal lifeless, but still warm. He loaded the deer into the back of his SUV—not to dispose of the animal at the dump, but to butcher it for winter meat at home.

Using kitchen shears and a mallet to cleave through bone, he was able to cut several steaks from the rump and a dozen medallions from the strap that runs along a deer's neck and back. He often roasts skewered cubes of meat in the fireplace and then dips them in mustard or peanut sauce.

"I'm no butcher, but I know good meat," he said, preferring to remain anonymous. (It is technically illegal to pick up roadkill, although enforcement is limited. Anyone wishing to do so should contact the local police department or a conservation officer to obtain a tag.) "It's a fabulous low-fat meat. It has all of the nutrients of all the other red meats you could possibly eat," he continued. "And it has a distinctive flavor."

Cooler weather and shorter days provoke the annual rut, bringing the season of sexual excitement that makes deer less shy and less careful. More dead animals lie along roadways. More anxious drivers steer clear of collisions. The pressure of deer populations mounts, as the animals graze their way through yards, farms and nurseries. As recently as the 1960s, it was rare to see a deer on the East End. But because deer generally give birth to twins, and even triplets in abundant years, deer can multiply exponentially. (One oft-cited study showed that six deer—two males and four females—with unlimited food and no predators, grew into a herd of 200 in just five years.)

Historically, people hunted for purposes beyond sustenance. Ask those who have lost the summer melons to crows and they'll tell you that people hunt to protect what they are trying to grow, or raise. In his



memoir of weather and life on the East End, *Winds of the Fish's Tail*, Bridgehampton farmer Dick Hendrickson recalls fall hunting and trapping as an essential curb on the abundant foxes, weasels, rabbits, raccoons, crows and other pests of his family's poultry operation and kitchen gardens. "That meant extra money if you were a good trapper," he writes. "In our time, rabbit pelts were hardly worth the trouble—maybe 6¢ to 10¢. However, possum skins returned 50¢ to \$1.50 each. Muskrats varied from \$1.25 to \$3. Once I caught a weasel and it returned \$4.25. The best I ever got was \$10 for a red fox." The town would also pay a bounty for "every pair of possum ears and \$1 for a red fox," part of the collective effort to keep wildlife populations down.

Recently, while assessing the damage that birds, deer, raccoons, ground hogs, possum, squirrels, chipmunks and other wildlife had inflicted on their 2006 grape crop, Sam McCullough, vineyard manager at the Lenz Winery in Peconic, and Larry Perrine, co-owner of Channing Daughters Winery in Bridgehampton, suggested a local movement to catch and eat these "critters" as part of a

"sustainable" food system here on the East End. "It would really take pressure off of us grape growers," Perrine said.

The experience of the vineyards is echoed in the orchards. Each winter, just to keep the nearby families of deer in check, Tom Wickham hires a member of the Mattituck gun club to cull between 40 and 50 deer on his family's fruit farm in Cutchogue. "We don't particularly enjoy it," he said. "We do this as a production necessity for farming." No farmer is calling for complete eradication, he said. "We lose our crop to all kinds of animals. But I just don't want to walk outdoors one morning and discover that an investment of hundreds of trees and thousands of dollars is totally lost."

We have many ingredients for meaty dishes running around our

RECIPE

URSULA'S VENISON STEW

By Ursula Massoud, Paumanok Vineyards, Aquebogue

To marinate meat:

6 lbs. venison, in 2-inch cubes
1 large onion, sliced
2 carrots, in 1-inch pieces
1 bay leaf
1 t. juniper berries
2 cloves
1 t. peppercorns
1/2 c. olive oil
1 to 2 bottles red wine
to cover meat

To finish the stew:

1/4 c. olive oil
12 whole cloves garlic
1 c. chopped onion
1/2 c. chopped carrots
1/2 c. chopped fennel t. thyme
1 t. herbes de Provence
salt and pepper to taste
red wine to cover meat, about
2 bottles

1. Place venison in large glass casserole dish. Combine marinade ingredients and pour over meat, mixing well. Marinate in refrigerator for 3 to 4 days.

2. Drain meat in a colander; reserve 2 cups of the marinade.

3. In an 8 quart Dutch oven, heat olive oil. Add meat in small batches and brown, reserving browned meat. Then, return all the meat to the pot and add the remaining ingredients plus the reserved marinade. Bring to a boil. Then lower heat and simmer around 3 hours. Adjust seasoning to taste. The stew tastes best when made 1 to 2 days before you plan on serving it; refrigerate and reheat. Makes 8 to 10 servings. (Note: This is a good dish to make when you want to use up left over wine.)

neighborhoods, but none is as voracious and successful as the white tail deer. And none is so abundant either. As the local hunting season opens, the question arises whether a bigger taste for venison could help curb deer herds. Is it time for a Hamptons Venison Company? Or how about a broader campaign that moves beyond ungulates to market smaller game?

State laws actually forbid hunters from selling game. That's why the venison or quail or rabbit that shows up as a pricey entrée at restaurants is farmed. But, historically, towns from Maryland to Maine have organized community events intended to encourage hunting and to make use of the meat that hunters couldn't possibly eat themselves. (The Shinnecocks have relied on deer for even longer.)

Over the last two decades, deer-riddled Shelter Island held at least two such events each year. One was organized by the Shelter Island Fire Department, whose members would hunt and set aside some portion of the harvest for a communal dinner of venison stew for the public in February. The other was held at the now defunct Harbor Inn, where a group of hunters would donate meat, and two local cooks volunteered their time to prepare a feast on the last day of hunting season. And hunting clubs from Mattituck to Montauk have held similar dinners with ingredients brought by their members. The Southampton Elks' Lodge hosts a notorious venison dinner, where the animal makes it into everything from stew to sausage to jerky.

To further boost the market, wildlife officials have encouraged several donation programs in New York State. "By filling your deer permits you can not only help reduce the State's growing deer population," the

New York Department of Conservation web site states, "but you can feed less fortunate families." Since 2000, the Venison Donation Coalition, a group of farmers, hunters, and food bank officials, has collected 400,000 pounds of ground venison for distribution by New York State food banks, equivalent to about one million servings.

But one million servings in five years is tiny compared to the millions of servings of beef, pork and chicken New Yorkers eat every day. And even though officials have modified long-standing hunting laws to help dwindling hunters deal with soaring deer herds—extending the season, expanding the area, and lowering the legal age for hunters—hunters taking animals for themselves, friends, and the occasional donation will only meet with so much success.

"Hunting is definitely the most efficient management tool for keeping down the numbers of species like deer," said Tim Charles, an outdoorsman and the outdoors columnist for *Suffolk Life*. Still, Charles notes that hunters are limited, particularly in residential areas, by how close they can get to their prey. Annually, Suffolk County hunters take

RECIPE

ROASTED LOIN OF VENISON WITH RED CABBAGE & MULLED CIDER SAUCE

By Tom Schaudel and Michael Ross,
Jedediah Hawkins House, Jamesport

For the venison:	2 T. fresh marjoram, chopped
4 6-oz. portions of venison cut from the loin	1 T. salt
2 T. fresh thyme, chopped	1/2 t. ground white pepper
	1/4 c. olive oil

Combine thyme, marjoram, salt, pepper, and oil in a bowl. Add venison and marinate in refrigerator for 12 to 24 hours.

For the cabbage:	2 T. granulated sugar
1 head red cabbage, chopped	1 red onion, julienne
1 c. cider vinegar	2 T. olive oil
1 T. salt	

In a large saute pan, heat olive oil. Add the red onion and saute 2 to 3 minutes. Add red cabbage, combine and let cook until cabbage is wilted. Add sugar, salt, and vinegar. Cook until tender over medium heat.

For the cider sauce:	2 T. light brown sugar
2 c. apple cider	2 c. chicken stock
2 cinnamon sticks	1 T. arrowroot
1/4 t. nutmeg, ground	1 T. cold water
1/4 t. allspice, ground	

In a saucepan combine apple cider, cinnamon sticks, nutmeg, allspice, and brown sugar. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until liquid is reduced by half. Add chicken stock and bring back to a boil. Reduce by half again. Combine arrowroot and water and whisk into sauce. Cook until slightly thickened, stain, and keep hot.

To finish dish: In a non-stick pan heat 1 T. olive oil. Place venison in hot oil and sear on all sides about 2 minutes per side. Place in 375° oven and cook 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from oven and let venison rest away from heat. Reheat red cabbage and place on a serving plate. Slice venison loin and place on plate with cabbage. Spoon hot cider sauce over venison and serve.

more than 1,700 deer during an archery season that runs from October through December, and a gun season during January. This compares with a considerably higher number of roadkill deer collected each year.

Mike Scheibel, natural resources manager at Shelter Island's Mashomack Preserve, where deer have prevented oak and hickory seedlings from maturing in some areas, knows that most hunters today limit themselves to how much deer they can give to family and friends. "People are happy to take fillets," said Scheibel, a hunter himself. "But they don't want you dropping a deer on the front step," he said. "If they were to allow for the sale of venison, you wonder if people might pursue it as a gainful venture. Who knows?"

The benefits of hunting more animals for meat won't simply go to the hunter and the connoisseur of wilderness-raised protein. It will also mean extra work for local butchers and novel ingredients for local chefs. The Suffolk County Farm in Yaphank slaughters cows and pigs for a nearby prison, and has developed a proposal to build a separate slaughtering and refrigeration facility just for venison. (Currently, the Department of Agriculture doesn't allow them to process venison in the same facility, because of the concern of the deer's fine hair and ticks getting into other meats.) "We just think it's a wonderful community service," said Patricia Hubbard, director of the farm. "Rather than have them lie fallow in the fields and stack them at the taxidermist."

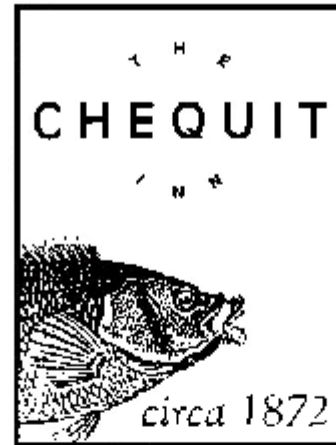
In contrast to the donations program, which only provides ground venison, Hubbard would envision ribs, loins, rumps and other interesting cuts. She estimated the start-up costs at \$300,000, and she already knows of strong potential demand from friends in the food industry.

But if game donation programs take advantage of legal loopholes, then why can't restaurants and grocers be just as creative. Perhaps when you order local venison in a restaurant, it doesn't show up on your bill, but instead you are expected to make a donation to the Wild Flavors Campaign on your way out. Already a few local restaurateur-hunters host occasional game dinners for friends and regular customers who don't pay at the dinner, but obviously pay at other times. Perhaps diners can accumulate credits or pay a wildlife surcharge at one meal that entitles them to dining on game for free during other meals.

"I'll tell you the chefs do wonders with the stuff," said Charles, the columnist for *Suffolk Life*, who has enjoyed his fair share of hunting club dinners. He doesn't think there's any real movement to change the law, although he suspects the first step might be converting Americans to the pleasures of meat that has never been hermetically sealed in a Styrofoam coffin. Across Europe, for instance, game is actually the more sought after option, as evidenced by elegant dishes like pheasant under glass, in which the bird is served under a glass dome to preserve the olfactory experience of meat moved straight from the field to your plate.

"When wild game is prepared properly," said Charles, "and that means proper prep in the field, bleeding it right, keeping it cool once you get it to the camp. If it's done right, it's not gamey at all. It's very tasty."

Years ago, unrestricted hunting drove many species toward extinction and prompted the now draconian game laws. But today we face a different problem, particularly when it comes to species like deer that are far from endangered. Short of some legal changes and some creative work by food businesses, the best strategy may be to make friends with your neighborhood hunter. Or become one yourself. □



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it's everything
a country restaurant
should be."*

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