

OUTDOORS

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This season, dress up your Venison

BY JIM LEE
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Every deer hunter knows how venison is cooked.

It's sizzled quickly in a frying pan oozing with margarine and freshly sliced onion, then topped with salty spices ... for heaven on a bun.

That's all there is to it ... fast, easy and no frills.

Why change?

Why not change, asks Dave Firnett, a 53-year-old butcher, deer slayer, author and chef with strong convictions on the culinary state of venison.

Firnett and his wife, Ruth, constitute D&R Processing, a two-person operation in Wallace, Mich., located about 15 miles north of the Marinette-Menominee border between Michigan and Wisconsin.

The company bills itself as "The Home of Quality Deer Eating" and vows to deliver "Venison ... Better than you thought possible."

In the Firnetts' case, better also can mean more expensive.

D&R charges \$75 for cutting up a deer and returning packaged boneless meat back to the hunter, almost twice what many local processors charge.

Firnett says a hunter regains much of the higher cost through the return of more venison and a better quality of venison through vacuum packing.

"In a good year, my wife and I will cut up about 200 deer, which is nothing (compared to many processors who handle 500 to 1,000 or more deer a year). But we physically can't handle any more than that.

"We spend an average of 3 to 3½ hours per deer. We can't process as many deer as people bring us. Last year, we turned away 50 to 100 deer."

D&R Processing is more than a venison factory that exists to produce chops and steaks and hamburger.

It is the gateway to tantalizing, palate-pleasing treatments of marinated venison.

Firnett will supply a hunter with as much venison steak or hamburger as requested, but he'll also turn a loin roast into Venison Cordon Bleu or Venison Porketta.

A sirloin tip can evolve into Monte Cristo Roast coordinated with sliced pork, deli ham, smoked turkey and Swiss cheese.

He touts Buffalo Chips, a gathering of lean venison cubes designed for dipping in spices and hot olive oil as "venison's answer to Buffalo Wings."

Firnett doesn't produce Wisconsin's traditional venison sausage in a casing.

"Customers can buy summer sausage cheaper at any grocery



Dave Firnett and his wife, Ruth, specialize in processing and marinating venison at their facility in Wallace, Mich., about 15 miles north of the Wisconsin border in the Upper Peninsula. They promote serving venison in a variety of tangy, non-traditional ways. Special to Gannett Wisconsin Newspapers

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— Dave Firnett, author of a cookbook, "Quality Deer Eating: Extremely Easy Venison."

store," he explains.

Instead, he makes 12 varieties of "fresh" sausage patties suitable for inclusion in breakfast menus, pizzas, chilis or ethnic dishes.

All of this special venison treatment comes with a price tag, but also with rewards for wives and hunters who have not relished their past experiences with deer dishes.

"We have a lot of women and families who wouldn't eat venison before and are now eating it," often without knowing the meat is venison, Firnett said.

Marinades are applied to

many of the company's approximately 45 specialty venison dishes.

"Marinades tenderize the meat, flavor it and take away any off taste," he explained.

Many of D&R's prepared roasts have pop-up heat thermometers inserted so that the meat is not cooked too long, a sure way to ruin a prime cut.

"One reason people don't like venison is because they've always eaten meat that was overcooked," Firnett said.

"A 2½-pound roast is going to take 35 to 45 minutes to cook at 350 degrees on a grill. With

1-inch-thick steaks, you grill them 2½ to 3 minutes on each side. When the meat is vacuum-packed, it cooks fast."

Firnett is the author of a cookbook titled "Quality Deer Eating: Extremely Easy Venison," in which he provides his favorite venison recipes. Information on the cookbook and D&R Processing can be obtained at the company's Web site, www.best-venison.com.

By the way, if you're intent on frying that next batch of venison steak, Firnett recommends olive oil as a substitute for margarine.