

Preparing venison into gourmet meals

Deer processor shares secrets in a cookbook

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You wouldn't slap a used pair of tires on a new Cadillac, catsup on a filet mignon or low-grade paint on a mansion.

So, why would you treat venison with run-of-the-mill blandness?

The Firnetts of northern Menominee Township treat it like a delicacy, and the result is an unlimited variety of mouth-watering main courses which could convert nearly everyone who tells you they don't like the taste of venison.

"I treat venison as a gourmet meat, and I treat it like it was very expensive beef," Dave Firnett said.

Tapping his 33 years in the meat business, the Firnetts opened D & R Processing at their home on the shoreline of the Menominee River. D & R (not to be confused with the DNR) is the acronym for Dave & Ruth Processing. It is a clever similarity which creates an easy business name to remember.

Their secret is to season venison like a fine restaurant would season a prime cut of beef, chicken or pork. Instead of preparing bland ground venison or grinding an entire deer into sausage, you can sit down to a meal of Montreal Roast, Italian Style Imperial Roast or mock chicken legs, or wake up to the sweet smell of maple and brown sugar-cured breakfast strips.

It's akin to the difference between an assembly line product and a custom-made

work of art.

Limited in the amount of deer they can process, the Firnetts now share their culinary secrets in a new cookbook, titled "QDE — Quality Deer Eating."

Motivation for the cookbook was partially the result of an offhand comment he made to Buck LeVasseur on the TV6 program, "Discovering." Firnett told LeVasseur on the air that he might write a cookbook. After the program aired, Firnett received 50 e-mails from people asking how they could purchase the cookbook.

"The demand was there and I felt it was time," he said.

The cookbook, which is currently on sale on their website and at their business at a cost of \$12.95, includes the same recipes the Firnetts use in deer processing. They aren't the least bit concerned about sharing their trade secrets.

"There's 10 million deer killed in the U.S. each year," he said. "I can cut maybe 300 of these deer. The cookbook is going to give people the ability to taste what we do."

Customer feedback puts a gleam in Firnett's eye as he reads the numerous e-mails.

"I think the best judge of your ability is what people say about you," he said.

One customer told the Firnetts that if they ever quit processing venison, her husband would be no longer be allowed to hunt.

"I'm in it more for the self-satisfaction of having people come back and say, 'man, that

was really a good roast, that was really a good sausage,'" he said.

Dave Firnett first started in the meat processing business in 1969. That year, he shot his first buck.

"So, it all kind of fell into place at the same time," he said.

He was meat department manager with the Kopp Corp. from 1970-'85. He then worked for three wholesalers before coming to Fairway Foods in Menominee. Currently, he serves as meat specialist with Fleming's Superior, Wis., division.

In 1996, the first year of D & R's operation, the Firnetts processed 27 deer. Since then, they've had double-digit increases each year. They serve customers from the U.P. and Wisconsin.

Their trade secrets encompass quality and quantity rather than a hasty, wasteful approach.

At optimum production during deer season, they can process four deer on a 12- to 14-hour day.

"There's two styles of processing in my opinion," he said. They are a mass merchandising style of cutting as many animals as possible, and then there's their custom-made approach, which is much more time consuming.

"I felt there was a consumer out there who wanted quality and variety," he said. "This is my hobby, so I can afford to take my time."

They produce quantity, as



EagleHerald/Jody Korch
Dave Firnett displays his new cookbook at his deer processing business on River Drive between Menominee and Wallace.

well — a 55 to 60 percent boneless yield on a properly dressed deer.

While the Wisconsin DNR is now advising meat processors to make exclusively boneless cuts, venison at D & R Processing has always been boneless.

Their gourmet roasts include pop-up timers. Steaks and roasts are seasoned with vacuum tumbled marinades.

Many of the recipes originated from Firnett's experiences in seasoning beef, chicken and pork. Others are the product of experiments and

suggestions. Anything to avoid the old, limited venison processing cuts.

"My contention was this is a waste, so I came up with all these other ways to make venison," he said. "If it'll work for beef cube steaks, it'll work for venison cube steaks."

Their Web site — www.best-venison.com — allows customers to buy seasoning, supplies or the cookbook, and have questions answered. The Web site was first up and running on March 15 of this year.

Two years ago, the Firnetts

opened their operation in a new 16 by 22-foot cutting room. Anybody can stop and see their operation every Saturday from now through March at their home, located at N2437 River Drive, Wallace (863-1282).

The cookbook — titled Quality Deer Eating — is a takeoff on the QDM abbreviation for quality deer management.

"What good is Quality Deer Management if you don't have quality deer eating," he said.