

## **Butcher It Right!**

By: Gerry Lavigne

Wild game like venison, moose and black bear are hunting staples in Maine. Properly handled, these wild meats can be epicurean delights. Too often, though, they disappoint. A lot of people, both hunters and non-hunters alike, have the opinion that wild game tastes tough, strong and “gamey”. They may suffer through by steeping steaks and cutlets in spicy marinades, or by lacing burger with domestic meats and spices. All of this is unnecessary. What folks are tasting in “gamey” meat is actually bacterial contamination and the inclusion of inedible parts of a carcass that really belong in the waste barrel. Proper handling in the field and on the butcher table ensures a highly palatable product when it reaches your dining room table.

During my 30 years as a big game biologist in Maine, I have seen literally thousands of deer, moose, and bear brought to tagging stations, and meat cutters. Since opening my wild game smoking business in 2006, I’ve had the opportunity process many thousands of pounds of wild game that others have first butchered. In all that time, I’ve seen both good and terrible meat processing by hunters who cut their own game, by part-time meat cutters, and by professional butchers. I’ve gotten a good sense of what some are doing right, and what others are messing up. With processing costs ranging from \$50 for a small deer, to \$700 for a large moose, hunters have plenty of incentive to bring a wholesome carcass to the butcher. And then they should insist that butchers follow good meat cutting practices. The following suggestions are offered to ensure that wholesome game meat makes it to your table.

In The Field As soon as your quarry takes its last breath, it begins to decompose. How rapidly that carcass spoils depends on how quickly the carcass can be chilled. If you cannot chill that critter to 38° F within a few hours, you risk spoilage. Look at how commercial slaughterhouses operate. A beef or hog is stunned, bled, skinned, and eviscerated all in less than 30 minutes. Before placing in the cooler, the carcass is washed inside and out, then sprayed with a vinegar solution to retard bacterial growth. In the field, try to replicate the slaughterhouse procedure as much as possible.

Don’t waste a lot of time taking pictures, or that may be all you’ll get to eat from your critter. Gut the animal right away, first thing. Hear that bear hunters? Don’t wait until you can hang your trophy on a scale to eviscerate it. Make sure you remove the rectum etc. from the pelvic cavity. Wash the body cavity with plenty of clean water to remove blood, foreign matter, or digesta.

Get your animal out of the field and into a cooler ASAP. During typical autumn weather, you need to get your moose or bear or deer undressed and started chilling within 4 to 6 hours, or you risk tainted meat. If that is not possible, consider skinning and quartering it to speed up cooling and transport. Protect the quarters from contamination by wrapping them in something porous like muslin or a clean sheet. Avoid getting hairs and dirt on the meat!

Skin the animal at your first opportunity. Those hides are designed to prevent heat loss; they only retard carcass chilling. In addition, the hair is a prime source of contamination, especially if you failed to remove the scent glands from the hocks on deer and moose. Remember, bull moose attract the ladies by wallowing in their own urine (Yum!). Cape or remove the head and treat it separately from the carcass.

Get the carcass into a cool (34 to 38° F) environment without delay. Split, quarter or bone the animal to accelerate chilling. Leave plenty of air space around the pieces. Never pile large hunks of meat one on top of the other more than 6 inches thick - it may not chill quickly enough.

If you do not have access to a refrigerator or cooler, and your barn or garage is not below 40° F, your options are limited. Butcher the animal as soon as the carcass reaches ambient temperature. Never let a carcass hang in freezing weather to

the point where it freezes solid. Thawing a frozen deer in the kitchen takes a long time. Before the inner core can thaw sufficiently, bacteria are already multiplying on the surface.

Even in a temperature-controlled environment, don't allow your carcass to hang too long. Eventually the bacteria will win. Remember, your wild game animal was not killed in the relatively clean slaughterhouse. Despite your best efforts, you probably brought in some unsavory hitchhikers. Under the best conditions, deer and moose carcasses should not hang longer than 7 days; bear should be butchered within 4 days. Sometimes your meat cutter may get behind schedule during the busy seasons. As a result, your game carcass may hang beyond 7 days. Do not allow this. Get on his case - he's risking a poor-eating, or spoiled product at your expense.

On The Butcher Table How your game is cut and packaged has a big impact on its table quality. First order of business: a clean work environment. If your meat cutter's shop is filthy, so too will be your meat. Check it out. If the shop doesn't appeal to you, look elsewhere. If you cut your own game, pay close attention to cleanliness. It matters.

Next, bone every part of that carcass. Do not slice it up on a bone saw. Any butcher who merely slices your deer, bear, or moose on the table saw is lazy, and he's providing you with a poor, highly contaminated product. With each slice, you get the contaminated surface membrane, unpalatable fat, bacteria-laced bone dust, and your previously wholesome meat.

Remove all visible fat and the attached membranes from the entire carcass. Deer and moose fat is unpalatable, like sheep tallow. Bear fat is softer, but unstable. It goes rancid quickly, even in the freezer. If you want fat in your burger, use pork. Beef tallow is little better than deer tallow. Even on lean carcasses, be sure to cut away that outer membrane. It's tough and likely contaminated, since it was the contact point with the air and with every surface the carcass touched while in transport and during hanging. These outer membranes are a major source of off- flavors in game meat.

Take the time to remove all large tendons and ligaments, and insist that your butcher does likewise. Tendons and ligaments are tough and indigestible, except when cooked for hours and hours. They do not improve the flavor of a steak or burger. Think of it as eating shoe leather. Too many commercial meat cutters leave too much tendon on the finished cuts. Any butcher who leaves the "silverskin" on your chops, steaks, and roasts is not giving you your money's worth. All stew meat should be free of tendons, as should your burger and sausage, to the degree possible. This includes carefully trimming the tendons and fat out of neck meat and flanks (belly meat) and shanks (lower legs). This is notoriously difficult, but worth the effort. Remove all blood-shot tissue and any obviously contaminated meat.

Cut steaks and chops across the grain for maximum tenderness. The large muscles of the hindquarter, the backstraps and the tenderloins make the best steaks and roasts. Steaks and roasts cut from the forequarters are likely to be tough. They need slow moist cooking to be tender. Many of my best customers are moose hunters who have tired of gnawing on leathery shoulder steaks for six months! Most parts of the shoulder on moose, deer and bear should go into stew meat, burger, or sausage. Ditto for necks, flanks, and shanks.

Butchered products must be promptly frozen in meal-sized packages. The freezer environment should be below 10° F. The best freezer wrap available today is vacuum sealing. Most of the larger outfits today offer vacuum sealing. Several good home versions are also available. If your butcher uses the old butcher paper wrapping method, insist on double-wrapping. Meat is first wrapped in a plastic film, then in a film-lined butcher paper. The objective is to exclude air from coming into contact with the meat. Failure to prevent this invites freezer burn and rancidity. Meat wrapped with only a single layer of butcher paper will soon freezer burn and leak. The worst method is to freeze the item in a plastic bag, even those rated as freezer-friendly. If you go the plastic bag route, first wrap the meat tightly with a plastic film.

Bon Appetit!