

STEPS FOR A BETTER STEAK

Not happy with what's coming off your grill? It may not be your cooking. For excellent big-game meat, meal preparation begins even before the animal is down. *By Bill Buckley, Field Editor of American Hunter*

There's a moment in every successful elk hunt when the euphoria of downing such a large, magnificent animal takes an abrupt back seat to the dread of having to skin and quarter it and get the meat off the mountain. Back-40 deer hunters and those able to gut an animal and then load it directly onto an ATV or truck don't confront the same logistical problems. Yet anytime a hunter has game on the ground, he better have a plan to care for the meat. If not, he could end up with a freezer full of bad dinners.

If your wife or kids groan at the mere mention of venison steaks, you're not handling your meat properly. If you have to buy Italian dressing by the gallon at Costco for marinades, or your freezer is half-full of deer meat dating back to the early '90s, it's time for a change. The following five tips will guarantee you end up with excellent game that's tender and requires no flavor-masking marinade. All it takes is a little foresight and meticulous care.

1- HUNT WITH A WELL-STOCKED PACK

Long before a hunt begins, you've got to anticipate the conditions you'll face—weather, day and nighttime temperatures, how far you're hunting from your vehicle and how long you're planning to be in the woods. You will need certain tools to ensure mortally wounded game is recovered and processed as quickly and cleanly as possible.

Whitetail and antelope hunters should carry the following items:

- Sharp knife and retractable sharpening stick (A 4-5-inch blade is perfect.)
- Water bottle (It helps keep meat clean.)
- Headlamp and spare flashlight, plus spare batteries (These are essential for recovering game shot in the evening and for field-dressing it cleanly.)
- GPS or surveyor's tape (You will need these to relocate your kill easily should you have to leave it overnight or get help.)
- Latex gloves (These will keep your hands clean and protected from infection or disease; you can contract brucellosis after field-dressing a wild boar and suffer severe problems for years.)

Backcountry or wilderness hunting requires these additional meat-care items since game will be quartered packing out:

- Quality game bags (Most commercial game bags are junk. Avoid those off-white, loose-weaved bags with threads that separate to 1/8 inch when stretched; they are no protection from dirt and egg flying flies. Alaska Game Bags are tight-woven and durable; they are the best bags for elk-sized game and can be purchased through Cabela's. For deer and antelope quarters, large zippered pillowcases from Kmart's Martha Stewart line work great.)
- 50 to 100 yards of no-stretch rope (you will use for hanging quarters and strapping them on frame packs.)
- T-handled bone saw

2- BE A CLEAN FREAK

The scent of elk urine is a huge turn-on for most hunters, but not when it is wafting up from your dinner plate. Oddly enough, neither is tarsal-gland scent, antelope musk, bile and intestines, hair, dirt and fir needles. One of your top two goals when handling game is to be a clean freak. When field dressing, minimize the risk of tainting the meat and spreading bacteria-friendly hair and dirt.

- Cut with the grain of the hair from the inside (down the brisket to the pelvis) and lift the hide ahead of the blade with the first two fingers of your off hand to reduce the risk of nicking the intestines.
- Before cutting the windpipe and pulling out the innards, completely sever the diaphragm and cut around the anus (from the outside) as deeply as your knife will allow. The easier it is to dislodge the guts, the less chance they'll tear if they've been perforated.
- Drain all the blood and foreign matter from the body cavity, using your water bottle if needed.
- Don't cut the brisket or meat between the hindquarters before the animal is out of the woods, unless cooling the meat can't wait.
- If necessary, hose out the body cavity once it is hung to remove dirt or paunch contents, but dry it out with clean cloths afterward, because water promotes bacteria.

Skinning and quartering require far more diligence since the meat will be exposed on all sides. Be meticulous about plucking off any loose hairs, bark and dirt before you place meat in game bags. Let your nose be your guide. Many elk steaks no doubt reek because they've contacted urine-soaked belly hair. Clean it off immediately. You can prevent this by handling fur as little as possible and by smelling your hands frequently. If you smell anything remotely suspicious, and on an elk or antelope that is no hard task, rinse your hands with water from your bottle and wipe them dry on clean clothing; also, keep your knife free of musk or intestinal matter. Be sure to smell every inch of meat before bagging it. If you detect a funky odor, removing the affected fascia normally solves the problem. Clean, fresh meat should smell sweet, so don't be afraid to bloody your nose seeking out any spots that aren't.

A word of caution: Don't go overboard when boning out meat. The more cuts you make, the more surface area you expose to foreign matter and the more it will dry out while curing. Cutting meat across the grain prior to rigor mortis shortens the meat fibers, resulting in tougher steaks. Femurs and shoulder blades don't weigh much so keep the quarters as big and whole as is manageable for packing out.

3- THINK COOL, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S HOT

More critical than keeping meat clean is cooling it to avoid spoilage, because whereas dirt and hair can be wiped off at home, soured meat is irreversible. That's why on large, bulky animals like elk and moose, nothing beats skinning and quartering for rapid cooling. Without insulating hide and fur, and with more surface area to dissipate heat, this is your best option under most conditions—and the only one in hot weather.

Even game that is as small as an antelope benefits from skinning and quartering. Antelope meat is something you either love or hate, and if you hate it, it is probably from soured meat. Hunting them is usually a warm-weather pursuit, so if you're going to gut an antelope in 70-plus degree weather, throw it in the back of a sun-baked truck bed, then drive around for a couple hours looking for your buddy's goat. Well what do you expect? In contrast, quarters placed in bags and laid on sagebrush tops as they're removed from the carcass, even with only a mild breeze are cool to the touch in a half-hour.

In other words, let common sense guide you. In warm weather, which describes most Western bow seasons, don't leave camp without game bags in your hunting pack. Gutting an elk, then returning miles to camp for meat-care tools, is flat-out stupid. First, it's a waste of energy; second it's likely a waste of meat. As you remove and bag each quarter, lay in the shade (the north side of thick timber will be shaded and cool most of the day) on top of a dreadfall or cut boughs to allow for maximum air circulation.

Cooler temperatures make meat care much easier, but in any event here are the rules you should follow:

- Quarters should be cool to the touch before placing them in a backpack or storage container for any length of time. Once in camp, hang meat in shade. As long as nighttime temperatures hit the 30s, it will keep for days.
- Don't place the meat in water to cool it down; again water causes bacteria, reducing the time you can age the meat. Similarly, letting meat sit in a cooler, swimming in blood, also promotes bacteria.
- If the meat gets wet from rain or snow, dry it off as soon as possible.
- Never wait till morning to recover a mortally wounded animal unless you keep bumping it while blood trailing; even in freezing weather, a deer can spoil if not field-dressed.

4- MEAT IMPROVES WITH AGE

If you don't butcher game, get the meat to a processor quickly so it can begin curing in a controlled environment. Otherwise, you've got to find the coolest, most temperature-regulated place at your disposal. Garages are great for hanging game and protecting from scavengers. As long as it's cold enough, you can keep the meat there until butchering. If able, store quarters in a refrigerator with the temperature dialed way down. Regardless of where you do it, here are some general guidelines recommended:

- The optimum temperature is 34 degrees, although anywhere between 32 and 40 degrees is excellent.
- If you are hanging meat in the garage, a wider temperature range is acceptable provided you check the meat daily.
- Meat gets tender by controlled bacterial growth, but not if the meat is frozen solid.
- Curing time depends on temperature (the warmer, the shorter time) and on the animal. A fawn can be butchered the next day, an older animal up to several weeks.
- Use your eyes and nose: A thin layer of mold inside the body cavity means you'd better start butchering, as does a sharper smell. Generally speaking, 7 to 10 days is perfect under optimum temperatures.
- Because the outside of skinned meat will dry over time, consider butchering any cuts to be ground early in the process, like neck, rib and should meat.

5- BUTCHERING AND PACKAGING

Everyone has his own ideas on how to butcher game, but when someone tells you they can butcher a deer in about an hour, beware. Good butchering takes time and attention to detail. Here are a few pointers from 30 years of anal-retentive butchering.

- The key to tender steaks, other than proper aging, is removing all fascia (that stretchy clear and whitish coating covering the outside of each quarter and each muscle group) and as much gristle and sinew as possible. For better flavor and longevity in the freezer, all possible fat must go, too. This step also gets rid of any remaining dirt and hair. In case you haven't caught on yet, the only good steak is a clean steak.
- Nothing beats a flexible fillet knife for removing fascia, fat and gristle, and for cutting out bones and steaks. To help the 7-inch blade of my Rapala glide between the fascia and meat, I keep it sharp and lightly coated with olive oil.
- Big-game fat has a higher melting point than that of domestic meat, which means any you eat will quickly coagulate and coat your mouth—it won't kill you, but why not try to avoid it. Since you'll want remove all that you can, you'll find butcher charts showing traditional cuts of beef to be somewhat meaningless. Instead, let your tastes determine what final form your meat takes. For example, if you like roasts over stews, keep shoulders whole. Or if you eat lots of burger, turn the whole front quarters into ground meat. Just remember to be as picky with your burger meat as you are with steaks.
- I typically divide each haunch as such: I cut straight across the haunch level with the ball joint, ending up with a boned rump roast (keep the bone on if you brought the animal out whole). I then separate each thigh muscle, trim the fascia and fat off each, and then cut individual steaks out of each. If the muscle is narrow and I want larger cuts, I butterfly them into roughly 2-inch steaks. That's about the perfect thickness for grilling. The lower leg meat and trimmings go into burger.
- Neck, brisket and front quarters can be made into all sorts of cuts, from thin-sliced fajita steaks to cubed stew meat to burger. For burger meat that's still healthy but holds together on the grill, add 5 percent beef fat. If chili and spaghetti sauce is the final destination, help your heart and forego the beef fat.
- If you shoot a fawn, make roasts out of the whole haunches; you'll never crave lamb again.
- Packaging greatly affects how long the meet will keep. To avoid freezer burn use either a vacuum-sealer or Ziploc Freezer Bags (quart size will do for all but big roasts). Zip each bag three-quarters shut and then suck all the air out of the bag while zipping it closed. Immediately wrap tightly in paper and tape. Meat with no fat can last five or more years without any freezer burn or funky taste.

Caring for wild game may take a little time and effort, but it's well worth the investment, especially since you'll be eating it for the next nine months or so. Just don't throw away all your hard work by overcooking it. In game cooking, it's medium rare or bust.