From Field to Table - Thoughts on Butchering Deer

By Leif HerrGesell

You shot your deer, gutted it and sweated mightily to drag it out, because, like me, you are a traditionalist and you do not like the easy path that others have taken. I am not an advocate of internal combustion engines after I get out of the SUV to begin the hunt. Mechanized transportation should be abandoned as soon as possible when hunting.

The taking and making of venison is about process, not quick results as seems so pervasive in today's super-sized, instant gratification society. Perhaps, however, you are getting long in the tooth for hard drags, so you hauled out that buck or doe via 4-wheeler or other such all-terrain type conveyance. I get it, there are places where dragging is required by hand and there are places where my traditionalist values would quaver and collapse in a puddle of perspiration.

The drag is actually the second step in making food from a harvest. Processing game begins the moment you field dress it and decide whether to quarter and pack, drag or dance the fandango to get it out of the woods.

Knowing the weather conditions for the next 24 to 48 hours will play a key role in butchering your deer. With your deer out of the woods and in a tree, garage, barn or the bed of the truck, you still have to decide whether to spend the money to pay someone else to butcher it up. Don't start the job yourself unless you have the time and tools in place. If you're not ready it is better to let a professional do it.

I do not resent paying a pro, but I will admit I am cheap, stubborn and like feeling self-reliant. Around my parts, a good butcher bill for one whitetail runs about $80 as of this writing in 2017. This would include choice of cuts, boned out meat, burger ground and all of it wrapped in

freezer wrap, labeled and boxed, ready for the deep freeze and eventually the chili pot or the barbecue.

Today there is a tool for everything. Home meat processing is no exception. You can purchase items to dehydrate, grind, package, smoke, and hermetically seal. If you want to open your own butcher shop I would think about $250-$500 will get you started. Hunters who shoot one, two or three deer a year will break even somewhere in the first three years of setting up a fully equipped do-it-yourself shop. If, like me, you want your venison to actually be economical, then adding all of the fancy equipment is a loser.

That expenditure still is not going to take into account your time and elbow grease. It will get you a nice product and if you want to make a lot of jerky it is the easier way. I have spent the grand sum of $10 on equipment and each year I will purchase about an additional $15 worth of plastic freezer bags. Some folks prefer freezer wrap. You choose.

It is best, when possible, to hang a deer for several days, weather permitting. Even the butcher will ideally let the deer hang for a few days in the cooler to allow the naturally occurring enzymes in the body to break down the meat tissues. Hanging with the hide on in the cool shade at temps 40 degrees or cooler is a cross between wet and dry aging. Your venison will not lose much moisture, but will tenderize and gain delicious flavor. This is how you get aged Angus burgers or steaks.

Hanging is not strictly necessary, but ideally 5-7 days of lynching will make more tender meat. Big old bucks need this more than a tender yearling. In cool weather hang that hatrack for at least a week if you can.

Some hunters swear by a head down orientation for aging meat, others prefer a heads up. I do not think there is much difference. Most of the blood is out of the body and presumably you know how to field dress and later wash out the body cavity with a garden hose. Just filler up and let it drain.

Head up may work a bit better on a deer that has been paunch shot, as it ensures all of the scattered gut matter falls out immediately and does not taint the meat. Of course, avoiding a paunch shot in the first place would be preferable. A simple clean scrub brush and your gutting knife will clean off clots, dirt, leaves and anything that might contaminate the meat while it ages.

A large skinning gambrel, or other ropes or tackle that allow you to hang the deer head down, so that the hocks are about as high as your head will facilitate removal of the hide. Keep a garbage bag or barrel handy for, legs, head and so forth. Clean your work area as you go. Mops and clean sponges and paper towels are a must.

You will make a mess when cleaning the interior portions, so do it where the bloody water is not going to create a problem such as attracting the neighbor's cat or dog, or staining the garage or basement floor. Take the high ground regarding casual observers by hanging a tarp to curtain off a space or close the garage door to conceal your skinning area from prying eyes. Offer some meat to the landowner. This is imperative. Simply making a generous offer with the inclusion of, perhaps, a Christmas card or note of thanks is huge to ensuring your hunting privileges continue.

My three basic butchering tools are a medium toothed, short bladed hand saw, a skinning knife with a blade about four inches in length and a fillet knife. The hand saw I use is a repurposed, square ended, stiff, miter saw. This morbidly resembles a Civil War era surgeon's saw. The similarity in tools may have added to why the battlefield surgery was called the butcher's pit.

In point of fact even farther back in history, butchers were often drafted into surgical service. I do not recommend you open a clinic removing frostbitten toes or cousin Dewey's extra trigger finger just yet.

With those basic tools you can skin, quarter, cut and slice up an entire deer. If you add a couple of tarps under your deer, a pair of five gallon pails for wash water and a hand held, electric reciprocating saw you can do it with less mess and save time. The electric saw will quickly

remove the rack, head, fore legs, back legs and cut the pelvic arch, as well as saw through thigh bone as you slice off steaks with the fillet knife.

The heavy work is accomplished with either the reciprocating saw or the Ka-bar Skinner that I also use to gut the deer. Obviously, keeping this saw clean, with a blade dedicated to meat cutting is imperative to maintaining sanitary conditions. There are no less than a dozen videos on the skinning and quartering of whitetails on YouTube. Some purport to do it in 10 minutes and, from what I can see, the deer is often small, still warm and they probably do not plan on boning it out.

Realistically, a mule deer or large whitetail buck that has hung for a few days should be skinned out in about a half an hour by one person,, if you are careful and not trying to prove something to a video audience. If it freezes solid, as can happen overnight in the North Country, I suggest you warm the water in one of the pails to thaw your hands in and plan on it taking more like 45 minutes.

I can cut a whole deer, alone, in a day. Others will say they can do it in much less time. I include skinning, boning and packaging in my estimation. If you can not dedicate a whole day, you can stretch the process out for a day or two if you keep the meat refrigerated while it waits for the grinder or packaging.

The fillet knife gets the most work out once the deer is skinned and quartered as it carves out steaks and roasts. Do not skimp and buy an $8 knife. You can get a good one for around $20, but you want good surgical quality steel. Dexter Russel makes a serviceable blade.

I have an ancient Swedish fisherman's fillet knife that I inherited. I sharpen it frequently with my Lansky sharpener and it does a great job. You can add a quality cleaver for bone work if you want. I have not found it worth the expenditure. Add a hand sharpener to your list of necessary tools. A dull knife will make the work onerous and sloppy. I sharpen about every ten minutes. Bone and fat will quickly dull blades.

Deer hair drops easily from the hide and you will undoubtedly get some on the meat. Clean it off as you go. I do this in two stages, once

before I begin slicing a haunch and then again as I begin packaging. If you have help you will hardly notice the effort.

I remove the tenderloins before I split the carcass lengthwise down the spine and then follow that up by removing the quarters. This depends heavily on how you intend to cut it up. If you want short ribs the process is wholly different and I leave that to you to decide. Again there is a wealth of video information. Watch several videos before you decide. This is a great project to study and plan for in the off season.

If you are not the primary cook you may want to check with that person to inquire what kind of cuts they most want. For years I made at least one roast out of every haunch only to find my wife did not care for the roasts as much as steaks. Now, I cut only steak from the haunches and a small amount of stew. We love making soup and stews out of the tender trim cuts. Burger is great if you have a family and want economy.

Antique shops here in the East are chock-a-block full of Enterprise, Griswold and Universal meat grinders. If you are having trouble finding one locally, look on eBay. In researching this article I found dozens at very reasonable prices. On my first foray to the shops to find a grinder I located nearly two dozen ranging in price from $10-$28.

I found a No. 3 Universal in great condition. The No. 2 grinder will also suffice in a pinch. These grinders were very common in nearly every household from the 1890's through the 1950's when grocery stores and processed food exploded across the nation, eliminating a lot of the previous kitchen prep. They are a hand crank, cast iron appliance that clamps onto a counter or table.

Put the kids to work turning the crank on that old grinder. Younger children often enjoy being included in what they think of as a grown-up activity and take pride in their contribution. I used to help my uncle with the grinding and remember well my aunt feeding the meat in as my cousin Jim or I cranked away.

Add some beef or pork fat as you grind and voila, burger. Add some seasonings like sage and pepper along with the pork fat and voila

again, breakfast sausage. If you want a new machine they are still made by several companies and some big box stores also carry them. Parts are also widely available on the internet.

Look online for a simple butcher's diagram. It will help you understand where the cuts come from. Some hunters cut their tenderloins into large pieces while others slice it down into small cross-section medallions. I prefer a mixture. Thickness of steaks is also somewhat a matter of opinion, but about one inch would be average. I bone out the ribs and grind it up into burger.

Building a small stationary smokehouse is a reasonable goal, even if you live in the suburbs. Smoking meat introduces other cooking and storage options. Check for local fire and zoning regulations and apply a heavy dose of common sense before you begin construction. If the power was to go out for a long time, smoking will provide a source of naturally preserved, highly flavorful meat. The commercial smoker or a smokehouse can also be used for other game meats. Smokers work best on jerky, pork bacon, hams (yes venison hams) and ribs. Salmon fishermen swear by them.

In the bad old days steaks were a luxury cut from fresh game and the remainder of the meat was smoked for use later on and hung in the cabin or household rafters. Even farmers seldom enjoyed such culinary treats, other than at butchering time.

The meat was bagged in cheese cloth to protect it from insects and stored in a place with moderate temperatures and low humidity. Smoked meat can last a very long time and six to nine months would have seemed more than fresh. Mold would occasionally grow on the exterior and this was simply scraped off, sometimes wiped lightly with vinegar. When it was time for consumption, the meat was soaked in spring water or milk to make it less salty and then cooked or served cold, depending upon taste.

In truth, the meat was already slow cooked and preserved. A smoked ham is different from a gigantic piece of jerky only by degrees and duration. One draws out all of the moisture and the other does not.

Modern "smoking" is almost always an infusion of liquid ingredients injected into the meat tissues that produces some preservation and augments the smoked flavor. Traditionally smoked meats are salt brine soaked and slowly cured with a cold smoky fire. The flavor evolves from the hardwood used in the fire and is part of the process of curing. Like jerky and bourbon and cigars, this is a matter of taste and there are thousands of recipes.

Maple sugar was used on pork hams in some of the colonial back settlements to add to the flavor complex. Meat that is too dry can be rehydrated to some extent and served hot or cold. This also was part of the reason chilis, relishes and gravies were popular before refrigeration for moistening the meat and also to improve the taste of unsmoked, brine pickled meats.

Any able bodied adolescent person can butcher a whitetail deer with the application of some patience and a modicum of planning. A pair of saw horses with a sheet of plywood will provide a cutting station indoors or out and the knives and saws I mentioned are the key to simple, but effective, butchery. Learning the ancient and satisfying craft of butchering your kill will save money, build confidence and initiate your children into the real production of non-industrial food.

Do not underestimate your own ability to produce great cuts of meat by adding a sharp knife to a day of light work. Be careful, use common sense and spend about an hour of research time to know the cuts you want from your deer. Slow down and savor the process. I guarantee the flavor of your venison will be even richer.