

The Wild Chef

JONATHAN MILES

Recipes that break out of the same old grind

Bring Me Your Venison

AT THE QUAKER CREEK STORE IN PINE Island, New York, about 50 miles northwest of Manhattan in the rural black-dirt bottomlands of the Warwick Valley, owner Bob Matuszewski sees a lot of venison. Come deer season, area hunters stream into the small roadside delicatessen hauling coolers filled with boned-out whitetails, ready to put their harvest into Matuszewski's gifted hands. As a third-generation butcher and sausage maker, he has an artist's touch with meats. For the fortunate local hunters, he can elevate ground venison to wild and glorious new heights.

"We had a game dinner for my dad's hunting club recently," he tells me, "and I did an olive loaf, a summer salami, and a cheddar-jalapeno bologna. Most of the guys who come in order breakfast sausage, sweet Italian, kielbasa, snack sticks, jerky, but some of the farmers who've got nuisance permits for hunting deer get bored with all that. For them, I'll make bratwursts and meatballs and pierogies and pretty much anything else we can think of."

Matuszewski's virtuoso skills and services may only be available to Warwick Valley hunters, but his ingenuity should be an inspiration to anyone weary of making the same old deer burgers and chili from the packages of ground venison in the freezer. With its intense, woody flavor, venison enhances any dish that normally uses ground beef: meatloaf, shepherd's pie, lasagna, etc. The only catch, according to Matuszewski: You have to add fat to the grind to give the meat the proper texture.

"Venison is so lean, and without fat, it can feel like sawdust in your mouth," he says. "Some old-timers like to use beef suet, but that's a little too fatty for me. We use beef trim-



MEAT MASTER: Bob Matuszewski, surrounded by his work, takes an artist's approach to butchering.

gings here—a half-pound to every pound of venison. When you're trimming beef steaks at home, cube the fat and freeze it so that you'll have some trim to grind in with your venison later." For his pierogies (a Polish pasta pocket akin to ravioli), Matuszewski stuffs a simple dough with a mixture of venison, chopped onion, and butter, then fries it in butter and serves it alongside some sautéed onions.

Take a bite and you're instantly transported to the feast at the end of a red stag hunt in the mountains of Poland—pretty good mileage for a few ounces of ground venison.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with deer burgers and venison chili, but

with a little gusto those stalwarts can go from satisfying to sublime. At Charlie Trotter's, the legendary five-star Chicago eatery, executive chef (and hunter) Matthias Merges cranks up ordinary deer-camp chili by adding juniper berries and bittersweet chocolate and serving it over four separately cooked batches of beans. "We wanted to see if we could elevate chili to a whole other level," Merges says. "By adding northern beans and rice beans, we brought some different textures and flavors to it that make it a little more complex."


For the recent book *Burgers* (Clarkson Potter), David Waltuck, the chef at Manhattan's vaunted Chanterelle, conceived a venison burger *au poivre*—that is, a venison patty bathed in a sauce made from brandy, Madeira, veal glaze, and three varieties of cracked peppercorns—that tastes like the creation of a

The Home Grinder



For do-it-yourselfers who prefer to butcher game at home, L.E.M. electric meat grinders are the industry standard. The .35-horsepower #8 model (\$249; 800-536-7763; www.lemproducts.com) grinds up to 240 pounds of meat per hour and comes with four stuffing tubes for making sausages. —J.M.

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French brasserie chef channeled through an American deer-camp kitchen. The same playful spirit evident in those dishes is what keeps Matuszewski content as his autumn workdays stretch to 14 and 16 hours. "We like to do a little experimenting and have a little fun here," he says, launching into a description of a recent concoction—a venison-chorizo burrito—before heading back to man the old grinder. 

Quaker Creek Store Venison Pierogies (Serves Four)

Bob Matuszewski's grandmother—the original source of this recipe—typically made these pierogies by shredding some roasted shoulder meat or by running cooked shoulder through a grinder, for a deeper texture. But ground venison works equally well, yielding a golden-hued venison pocket similar to fried ravioli.

Dough:

- 2 cups flour
- 2 large eggs
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 cup water

Filling:

- 1/2 cup ground venison, browned
- 1 finely chopped onion
- 1 tablespoon butter
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

❶ To make the filling: Sauté the onion in the butter until translucent, and then season to taste with salt and pepper. Mix with the browned venison and let cool.

❷ To make the dough: Mound the flour on a kneading board (or any non-stick counter surface) and form a hole in the center. Drop the eggs into the hole and cut them into the flour with a knife. Add the salt and water and knead the dough until it's firm. Cover with a warm towel and let rest for 10 minutes. Divide the dough into two halves and roll out the halves until thin. With a biscuit cutter or a glass, cut the dough into rounds.

❸ Spoon a dollop of filling onto the middle of each round. Moisten the edges with water, fold the dough over,

and seal the edges together firmly with the tines of a fork. (Be sure they're well sealed so they don't open while cooking.)

❹ Drop the pierogies into boiling salted water and cook for 4 minutes. Remove from the water with a slotted spoon.

❺ When ready to serve, melt a few pats of butter over medium heat. Sauté the pierogies on both sides until they're golden brown. If desired, serve with sautéed onions.