REALTREE PRESENTS

Timber to Table

WILD GAME AND FISH COOKBOOK



MICHAEL PENDLEY



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MICHAEL PENDLEY

Foreword by Will Brantley



Essex, Connecticut

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Cheryl, let's go on an adventure

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FOREWORD

THE HUNTING AND FISHING WORLD IS AWASH IN cooking bloggers, foodie influencers, and celebrity chefs. I've met many of them, edited some of their work, and cooked several of their recipes. If I had to choose one, and put my money on him to (1) cook up some wild critter and make it delicious and (2) provide said wild critter with his own gun or rod and reel, it would be Realtree's Michael Pendley. No offense to Steve Rinella, Scott Leysath, or Jonathan Miles. You guys are all great, and you can cook too; it's just that Pendley cooks a little better.

I'm proud to say that I knew Pendley before he became famous. Back in the 2010s, we were brainstorming during a Realtree.com editorial meeting, and the fact that we didn't have a regular food blogger was a source of some consternation among the top brass. But I did know of a guy; he was a landscaper who lived not far from me in western Kentucky, and we were both members of a local hunting talk forum (remember those?).

This guy, named Michael Pendley, would weigh in on all sorts of hunting and fishing topics—and follow up with a picture of what looked to be the most delicious wild game dish you'd ever seen. Friends who'd shared camp with him said that his cooking was simply incredible. His training consisted mainly of watching his mom and grandmothers cook, along with, as he says, being yelled at by some of the best chefs in Lexington while working in restaurants during college.

Besides that, Pendley had a way with words, and I found out later that he was an English major in college. His first assignment for Realtree.com, "The Bacon Lover's Guide to Wild Game," hit it out of the park. Many of the wild game recipes of the day that you were likely to find in magazines and online seemed to almost thumb their noses at the traditional cooking methods so many hunters enjoyed—things like bacon, crispy batter, and hot grease—in favor of complex ingredients and difficult presentations. But Pendley leaned in and embraced what tasted good while at the same time presenting a number of new and classy presentations that I'd never seen. Neither had Realtree.com readers.

We followed up by giving Pendley a regular cooking column on Realtree.com, called “Timber 2 Table,” which he’s updated with recipes and articles for a decade now—without ever, to my memory, missing a deadline. It’s not only one of the most popular parts of Realtree.com but also one of the most popular outlets for hunting and fishing content on the Internet, period. It’s my firm belief that T2T—which we at Realtree call it for short—has opened the eyes of many non-hunters to the joys of the outdoors and wild game cooking.

I still enjoy many of Pendley’s classic recipes the best, and you’ll find those here, from Grilled Dove Poppers to Extra-Crispy Restaurant-Style Wild Turkey Fingers. But you’ll also find some more unusual fare and regional favorites, like Old Florida Fishing Town Smoked Mullet, Hawaiian Grilled Squirrel, and Dutch Oven Beaver Roast. Almost without fail, Pendley’s recipes are easy to follow and can be prepared with ingredients that you can find at the local grocery store. And you’ll be entertained while reading them, as many of his recipes have been inspired by his extensive travels and stops at hole-in-the-wall restaurants, where Pendley is never shy about quizzing the chefs on the history of their signature dishes.

The *Timber 2 Table Wild Game and Fish Cookbook* is one you’ll want to save for the recipes—and to sit down and read just for the fun of it, following a good meal at camp.

—WILL BRANTLEY, editor-in-chief, Realtree.com

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INTRODUCTION

I WAS BORN LUCKY. GROWING UP IN WESTERN KENTUCKY along the Pond River, my brother and I had free run of not only our family farm but also surrounding friends' and extended family's tracts. We had thousands of acres of hardwoods, ag fields, and river bottoms as a teacher and always had a new classroom to attend.

I was also born into a family of excellent cooks. My grandmothers were queens of the kitchen. Everything they cooked had a magical taste that I never have quite duplicated, even after standing at their elbows and watching every step they made and each ingredient they used.

My mom continued the tradition, teaching me more about her recipes and those passed down from previous generations. We grew up a family of hunters, and wild game was often on the menu. Cooking quickly became one of my favorite things to do when I wasn't out hunting or fishing.

We processed our own game, along with regular hogs and the occasional beef steer. From that I learned how to properly care for meat, how to break down the various primal cuts, and how to store the meat for the long haul so that it would last until hunting seasons rolled back around. Seeing the animal as a whole provided insight into the different cuts and how to best use them in various recipes and cooking methods.

Throughout college, wild game sustained my roommate and me when meager finances often went toward other (usually drinkable) things. When friends, often from non-hunting families, would visit, we would serve them up wild game dishes in imaginative ways as a way to introduce them to more varied protein sources.

A few college stints in some very good restaurant kitchens taught me recipe-building techniques and only strengthened my desire to incorporate wild game into more and more varied dishes, including cuisines from other countries.

Today, most of my cooking is done for friends and family, with the occasional catering gig at weddings, cookouts, and parties and such thrown in for good measure. I'm blessed each year to travel to speak about wild

game and to cook at hunt camps all over the country. I'll stand behind this: There is no better seasoning for food than the atmosphere of a good hunt camp full of friends. It just makes everything taste better.

These days, when I talk to people about wild game, I repeatedly hear the same general concepts get repeated. The first is "you ruined that [deer, elk, turkey, etc.] by not cooking it like this" (usually fried). I understand; they are family favorites for a reason. I have some recipes from my youth that I still cook on a regular basis. And I admit to loving chicken-fried everything. But that isn't the only way to cook wild game. No one wants to eat the same meal over and over for the rest of their life. Branch out and try some of these recipes before you write off getting out of your comfort zone.

The second concern usually goes like this: "I tried wild game once, and it was [insert one: tough, chewy, gamey, dry, or some other description that is less than desirable for your dinner]." With this one, I'll agree. To a point. I've tasted some less-than-excellent wild game dishes over the years. Heck, I've even cooked a few. But there is no doubt in my mind that, given a chance, most people will find a dish or two they love somewhere in this book.

These recipes aren't complicated. Most use simple ingredients that you can find at any grocery store. The techniques are simple and straightforward. I try to build recipes that anyone can make—and make well. Sure, it helps to be familiar with basic kitchen tools and few techniques, but I do my best to explain so that someone who has never cooked before can successfully complete the recipe.

My inspiration for most of these recipes comes from family recipes, a lifetime of voracious cookbook consumption, a penchant for travel and seeking out local restaurants wherever we go, and even online recipes I see posted on various social media platforms.

When I see an interesting recipe or enjoy an exceptional meal at a restaurant, I'll try to re-create the dish using wild game. While it rarely turns out exactly like the inspiration, these efforts often turn into regularly appearing family favorites at our table.

One final thing: Treat most recipes as more of a suggestion than a hard-and-fast set of rules. A recipe is a basic outline of an idea, not a finished novel. See an ingredient you don't like? Leave it out. Or substitute something you enjoy. Most of the time the recipe still works. Same goes for

spice level. You know better than anyone what your friends and family enjoy. Feel free to adjust up or down to fit your palate.

I hope you like these recipes. I hope some of them turn into family favorites that get passed down to future generations. But, most of all, I hope something in this book inspires you to expand your use of wild game. It is some of the healthiest and, in my book, best-tasting protein on the planet. The fact that obtaining it is so much fun is just a bonus.

The recipes in this book were created and cooked as actual meals for my family. Most of them will feed four to six people. Some, like the appetizers and some of the soups and stews, will feed a few more.

From my family to yours, enjoy!

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VENISON

THE FIRST CHAPTER IN THIS BOOK IS ABOUT VENISON. For most of my life, that meant whitetail deer. I grew up hunting and eating whitetails in the western part of Kentucky, and they remain one of my favorite game animals. But whitetails aren't the only thing we hunt. I've also included a few of our favorite elk, mule deer, and even moose recipes. Luckily, most of these recipes are interchangeable with any type of venison, so use what you happen to have in the freezer.

When people claim to not enjoy venison, often it is due to poor handling in the field or overcooking in the kitchen. To start, venison is a lean meat with much less intramuscular fat than beef or pork. When you cook it past medium temperatures of 140°F to 145°F, it starts to dry out and get chewy. Rare and medium rare are the way to go when cooking any type of venison with a hot-and-fast method like a hot skillet or a grill. Conversely, a long slow cook at low temperatures with some liquid—say, a braising pan in the oven or a slow cooker—will break down the connective tissue that can make your venison chew like an old leather boot. Give it enough time at low heat, and those fibers break down and your deer or elk meat will be fall-apart tender. Long story short, hot and fast until it hits rare up to medium, or low and slow until it falls apart.

While we are on the subject, let's talk a bit about field care. You wouldn't go to a butcher shop, buy their best cowboy cut ribeye, and toss it in the back of your truck on a warm summer evening while you drive around for hours showing it off to your buddies. Same goes for venison. When temperatures are over 40°F, get your game skinned and cooled as fast as possible, be it in a cooler with ice, in a walk-in meat locker, or in game bags and hung in a shady spot with cool to cold temperatures.

And keep it dry. Moisture breeds bacteria, so hanging meat needs to stay dry. Even if your meat is cold enough to prevent bacteria growth, soaking it in a cooler full of ice water leads to less-than-optimal table fare. Instead, place a layer of ice on the bottom of a cooler, cover it with cardboard, and then place your quartered or boned-out venison on top of that. Open the drain plug and allow any melted ice to run out so that your venison isn't swimming. Chances are good that if you have ever heard

someone complain about “gamey”-tasting meat, better handling in the field might have prevented those off flavors.

GRILLED BACKSTRAP WITH BOURBON GARLIC CREAM SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

1.5–2-pound section of venison backstrap trimmed of fat and silver skin

2 teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon dried rosemary

1 teaspoon vegetable oil

SAUCE

3 tablespoons butter

2–3 cloves whole garlic, peeled and chopped

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

½ cup heavy whipping cream

2 teaspoons fresh thyme, finely chopped

¼ cup Evan Williams Bourbon

¼ cup beef broth

1 teaspoon ground black pepper

This recipe features grilled venison backstrap in an easy bourbon garlic pan sauce that you make right on the grill.

Start by placing a cast-iron skillet on the grate as the grill preheats so that it will be hot when you start to cook. This recipe has a two-step cooking process: first the sear, then finishing directly on the grill. Take care when adding the bourbon. Don’t splash it on hot coals or fire because it could ignite.

Place an iron skillet on your grill set at 350°F. Trim your backstrap roast. Season the meat well on all sides with salt, black pepper, garlic powder, and dried rosemary.

Drizzle oil over the hot skillet. Place the backstrap roast directly into the skillet. Sear one side for 1 to 2 minutes, flip, and repeat until all sides of the backstrap are seared.



Move the backstrap to an upper grill rack. Add the butter to the hot pan. Scrape to loosen stuck-on bits left from the backstrap. Add the garlic to the butter and cook for 2 to 3 minutes.

Add the Dijon mustard and heavy cream. Stir well. Add remaining sauce ingredients. Stir until the sauce bubbles and starts to thicken.

Return the backstrap to the pan and spoon the sauce over the meat. Use an instant-read thermometer to check for an internal temperature of around 125°F to 130°F. The internal temperature will continue to rise a couple more degrees with carryover heat after the meat has been removed from the grill.

Rest the backstrap for 5 minutes. Then slice it into medallions. Spoon over additional pan sauce or return the sliced medallions to the pan just before serving.



BACKSTRAP WITH SMOKED CREAM CHEESE AND BACON JAM APPETIZERS

INGREDIENTS

2 blocks (8 ounces each) cream cheese (you will have some left over after making the recipe; just refrigerate and snack on it later)

BBQ rub of choice

Ritz crackers

8 ounces grilled venison backstrap, sliced thin

Hot pepper bacon jam

Not long ago, I found myself with some leftover backstrap, and I decided to use it for an appetizer.

Now a good appetizer (in my book, anyway) needs a few things. First, it should be easy to eat on the go. I like to serve up appetizers that folks can snack on while they mingle and talk, not something they have to sit down at a table and grab some silverware to consume.

Next, it needs to have a balance of flavors and textures. Creamy and crunchy go together, as do sweet, savory, and a bit of heat. This one nails all the requirements.

Start out by smoking the cream cheese. That process is as simple as putting a block or two into an aluminum pan, scoring the surface in a cross hatch to get a bit of extra surface area, and then shaking on your favorite seasoning. (For this one, I did a sweet-and-spicy BBQ rub. If you want even more sweetness, give it a thin drizzle of honey. Try hot honey for extra heat.) Place it into the smoker at 225°F for about 2 hours. That’s it. Done. Try some by itself on a cracker. Good, isn’t it? It gets even better.

After you have that ready, the recipe goes together really fast. Start with your favorite snack cracker. I used Ritz. Spread on a layer of the cream cheese.

Top it with a thin slice of grilled backstrap.

Now comes the sweet-and-heat part. I like to use hot pepper bacon jam. You can make your own, or you can find it in the jelly section of most large supermarkets.

If you can’t find it, and don’t have time to make it, substitute hot pepper jelly from the market. Just spoon a bit onto each backstrap slice. That’s it. Serve and enjoy. I told you they were easy.

GRILLED VENISON BACKSTRAP ITALIAN SUB

INGREDIENTS

1 pound backstrap roast

Italian-style salad dressing

1 loaf Italian, French, or sourdough bread

Cold cuts like salami, prosciutto, and pepperoni

Sliced provolone cheese

Shredded lettuce

Sliced tomato

I love a good sub sandwich piled high with salami, pepperoni, prosciutto, cheese, lettuce, tomato, and dressing on good bread. But sliced, marinated, and grilled backstrap makes it even better.

To start, we marinate a backstrap roast 4 hours and up to overnight in zesty Italian salad dressing. Just put the backstrap roast in a zip-top bag and pour over your favorite brand of dressing.

When you are ready to build your sandwich, fire up your grill to 350°F. While it preheats, build the base of your sandwich. I like Italian, French, or sourdough bread. Slice the bread open and add the sliced meat of your choice. I usually use salami, prosciutto, and pepperoni, but you can use ham, turkey, or whatever you like.

Top the meat with provolone cheese.

Once the grill is hot, cook the backstrap for about 5 minutes per side. When you open the grill to flip it, put the sandwich on the upper rack and top it off. This will heat the meat through, toast the bread, and melt the cheese.

When the backstrap reaches about 125°F internally, pull it from the grill and allow it to rest.



Go ahead and remove the sandwich.

Slice the rested backstrap into thin medallions.

Layer the backstrap over the melted cheese on the sandwich.

Top with shredded lettuce, sliced tomato, and whatever sub dressing you prefer. Slice the sandwich into serving sizes.



DATE-NIGHT VENISON TENDERLOIN WITH RED WINE PAN SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

2 venison tenderloins

Oil, lard, duck fat, or beef tallow for pan searing

Salt and pepper to taste

1 cup beef stock 1 cup red wine

1 clove garlic, minced

1 tablespoon dehydrated onion

1 teaspoon dried Italian seasoning

3–4 tablespoons butter, divided

Forget to make a restaurant reservation for a big day? No problem. First, get some halved red or gold potatoes and asparagus into the oven to roast.

Tenderloin is the perfect cut for this recipe. It’s tender, cooks fast, tastes delicious, and is perfect for a quick dinner. If you’ve already eaten all your tenderloin, use some backstrap steaks instead. Start by cutting the tenderloin into medallions that are about an inch and a quarter to an inch and a half thick. Heat some oil, lard, duck fat, or beef tallow in a skillet over medium-high heat. Season the venison on both sides with salt and pepper.

Brown the venison on all sides, taking care not to overcook. Shoot for medium rare. Just turn the meat in the pan every 30 to 60 seconds until you have good color all around. Move the venison to a warm platter and loosely cover with foil to rest.

See all that cooked-on brown stuff in the bottom of the skillet? That’s good. That’s where the flavor comes from. Pour in 1 cup of beef stock and bring to a boil, using a wooden spoon or hard plastic spatula to scrape away at that cooked-on stuff in the skillet. Once you have everything scraped up, add a cup of your favorite red wine. Save the rest of the bottle to serve with dinner. Continue boiling to reduce. Add a clove of minced garlic, a tablespoon of dehydrated onion, and a teaspoon of dried Italian seasoning to the pan. Continue boiling until the liquid reduces by about half. Turn off the heat. To thicken the sauce, stir in 3 to 4 tablespoons of butter, a tablespoon at a time. Stir each pat until it melts before adding the next one.

Plate up a few of the tenderloin medallions with some asparagus and roasted potatoes. Spoon over the pan sauce. Serve it up with a candle and a glass of wine. Finish the meal with some cold-smoked chocolate. Trust me on this one—it will get you out of the doghouse for forgetting the holiday in the first place.

VENISON STEAK AND BLUE CHEESE ALFREDO

INGREDIENTS

1 pound venison steak, cut into strips

2 tablespoons oil

2 teaspoons garlic powder

1 teaspoon onion powder

Salt and pepper

3 tablespoons butter

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 cup heavy cream

1 teaspoon dried Italian seasoning blend

1 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

½ cup blue cheese crumbles

8 ounces fettuccine, cooked and drained

Tangy blue cheese crumbles pair nicely with savory strips of venison steak and the creamy Alfredo sauce. If you don’t care for the flavor of traditional blue cheese but still want to try the recipe, substitute feta cheese crumbles for a milder version that is still delicious.

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Season the steak strips with the garlic powder, onion powder, and salt and pepper. Sear the steak for a few minutes per side, until well browned but still medium-rare. Set the meat aside on a warm platter.

Reduce the heat to medium. Add the butter to the pan and then sauté the garlic, stirring constantly to prevent burning.

Once the garlic has cooked for a minute or two, add the heavy cream, Italian seasoning, and Parmesan cheese. Stir in the blue cheese crumbles. Add the cooked and drained fettuccine and stir well to fully coat the pasta.

Return the cooked venison steak strips to the pan and stir well to combine.

Serve it up with some garlic bread and a salad.





DR PEPPER MARINATED VENISON BACKSTRAP

INGREDIENTS

1–2 pounds venison backstrap roast

12 ounces regular (not diet) Dr Pepper soda

½ cup soy sauce

½ cup Worcestershire sauce

2 cloves garlic, minced

Salt and pepper or Realtree APX seasoning blend

Believe it or not, Dr Pepper makes a great base for a marinade. The carbonation and acidic nature of the drink help to tenderize the meat, and the fruit-based flavors pair perfectly with the backstrap. Since every good marinade has a balance of flavors, this one gets a bit of saltiness from a combination of soy sauce and Worcestershire. For even more flavor, some minced garlic gets tossed in.

And that’s about it. Mix the marinade ingredients in a zip-top bag, add a section of well-trimmed backstrap, work it around a bit with your hands to fully coat the meat, and then pop it in the refrigerator for 4 to 8 hours.

Once marinated, remove the backstrap from the bag and pat it dry with paper towels. Season the meat all over with salt and pepper or Realtree

APX seasoning blend. Place the roast on your preheated Pitboss Grill at 350°F and grill until the center reaches 125°F to 130°F for medium rare.

Remove the backstrap from the grill, loosely tent with foil, and rest for 5 to 10 minutes before slicing.

Slice the backstrap into half-inch to three-quarter-inch medallions and serve over rice or potatoes and with a vegetable or two of choice.

BOURBON BROWN SUGAR SMOKED VENISON SANDWICH

INGREDIENTS

1 venison roast, 2–2.5 pounds

1 packet McCormick Brown Sugar Bourbon 30-Minute Marinade

½ cup Evan Williams bourbon

½ cup Worcestershire sauce

Salt and pepper

Bread of choice

Prepared creamy horseradish sauce or garlic aioli

The Brown Sugar Bourbon 30-Minute Marinade from McCormick Grill Mates makes a nice shortcut in the kitchen. To kick up the bourbon flavor a bit more, I add a half-cup of Evan Williams bourbon and a half-cup of Worcestershire sauce to the mix.

Start with a boneless venison roast. You will be slicing it thin, so just about any roast will work for this one. I used a sirloin tip, commonly called the football roast. Simply place the roast in a zip-top bag and add the McCormick marinade along with the additional bourbon and Worcestershire sauce. Seal it up and put it in the fridge. I know the packet says 30-minute marinade, but this is a sizable piece of meat, so I like to leave it in for 4 to 8

hours. Start it in the morning before you head out, and it will be perfect when you get home that evening.

When you are ready to cook, pat the marinated roast dry and season well with salt and pepper. Heat your grill to 325°F and place the roast directly on the grill grate. I like to use the Pitboss Smoke Tube for extra smoke flavor.



Grill the roast for 45 to 60 minutes or until it hits your desired doneness. I shoot for 120°F internal temperature on these. I like a rare to medium-rare roast for thin slicing on sandwiches. If you prefer your venison closer to medium, shoot for 130°F to 135°F internal.

When your venison is ready, remove it from the grill and let it rest, loosely tented with foil, for 10 to 15 minutes before slicing.

Use a sharp knife to slice roast-beef-style thin slices from the roast, always cutting across the grain for tenderness. Pile the slices high on your bread of choice, and top with your favorite sandwich topping.

Horseradish is excellent for this one, as is a nice garlic aioli.

MAPLE-GLAZED VENISON BACKSTRAP AND CORNBREAD DRESSING

INGREDIENTS

3 pounds venison backstrap roast

Salt, pepper, dried rosemary, and sage to taste

Glaze of ½ cup real maple syrup and ¼ cup soy sauce with two cloves of minced garlic

CORNBREAD

1 tablespoon bacon grease, lard, or vegetable shortening

2 cups self-rising white cornmeal mix

1 large egg

1½ cups milk or buttermilk

½ teaspoon salt

¼ cup vegetable oil

DRESSING

1 pound hot or medium breakfast sausage

2 stalks celery, diced

1 onion, diced

4 cups coarsely crumbled cornbread

¼ cup dried parsley

1 teaspoon dried sage

1 tablespoon dried poultry seasoning

1 cup chicken broth

½ cup butter, melted

1 egg, lightly beaten

The very first Thanksgiving likely featured more venison and fish than turkey. For this dish, I used an entire backstrap from a young doe. Since the backstrap was on the skinny side, I doubled and tied it with butcher’s twine. If you use the backstrap from a big buck, you can skip the double-and-tie portion.

For the cornbread dressing, you will need some cornbread. Break out your iron skillet. Put a tablespoon of lard, bacon grease, or vegetable shortening in and put the skillet into a preheated 375°F oven. While the skillet heats up, in a large bowl combine 2 cups self-rising cornmeal mix with one beaten egg, one and a half cups buttermilk, and a half teaspoon of salt. Stir in the oil. It’s okay if it’s still a little lumpy; don’t overmix.

Carefully remove the skillet from the oven. Swirl the now-melted grease around to fully coat the skillet and pour in the cornbread batter. Place the skillet back into the oven and bake for 30 to 40 minutes (or until the cornbread is set and a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean).



When the cornbread is finished, turn it out onto a cooling rack. While it cools, brown 1 pound of spicy breakfast sausage with two stalks of celery, diced, and one medium onion, diced. When the sausage has fully browned and the onion and celery are soft, move the pan off the heat and allow the mixture to cool.

To make the dressing, crumble about 4 cups of the cornbread into a large bowl.

Mix in the cooked sausage, celery, and onion. Add the parsley, sage, poultry seasoning, chicken broth, melted butter, and beaten egg. Stir well to blend. The mixture should be moist. If it isn’t, add a bit more chicken broth.

Turn the dressing mixture into an oiled or buttered 13x9 Pyrex dish. Cover with foil and bake at 350°F for 45 minutes, removing the foil for the last 10 minutes.

While the dressing bakes, preheat your grill to 350 degrees. Blend the maple syrup, soy sauce, and garlic. Season the backstrap all over with salt, pepper, dried rosemary, and sage.

Brush on a layer of the maple glaze. Place the backstrap on the grill for 25 to 30 minutes or until it reaches your desired doneness. I like to pull mine at 125°F to 130°F, knowing it will continue to rise a few more degrees as it rests.

Move the backstrap to a cutting board and tent with foil for 10 minutes. If you tied your roll, you can remove the strings after the backstrap rests.

To serve, turn the dressing onto a serving platter. Fluff it up with a fork. Slice the backstrap into medallions and layer over the dressing.



BOURBON HONEY GLAZED VENISON STEAK TIPS

INGREDIENTS

1.5–2 pounds venison steak tips, cut into 1-inch cubes

½ cup bourbon, plus 3 tablespoons

⅓ cup soy sauce

⅓ cup honey, plus 2 tablespoons

¼ cup Worcestershire sauce

⅓ cup balsamic vinegar

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon each salt and black pepper

2–3 tablespoons vegetable or other high-heat oil

This sweet-and-salty marinade is bursting with bourbon and honey flavor.

I like to use a top or bottom round for this one. Cut it into roughly 1-inch or slightly larger cubes, trimming away any connective tissue as you go. Place the meat into a 1-gallon ziptop bag.

Mix the marinade ingredients, reserving 3 tablespoons of bourbon and 2 tablespoons of honey for a glaze as the steak cooks.

Pour the marinade over the meat and refrigerate at least 4 hours or, preferably, overnight. When you are ready to cook, drain the excess marinade from the meat. Mix the reserved bourbon and honey and set aside.

Heat a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Once the pan is hot, drizzle over some vegetable or other high-temperature oil, probably a couple tablespoons depending on pan size. Give the pan a swirl to evenly spread the oil.

Place the steak tips into the pan, taking care not to overcrowd. Work in batches, if needed, to allow the meat to sear without steaming. Brown the venison on all sides, cooking until rare to medium rare. Drain any excess moisture from the pan, and then return all the seared venison.

Pour over the bourbon-honey glaze and stir to evenly coat the meat.



PARMESAN-CRUSTED VENISON BACKSTRAP MEDALLIONS

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds of deer or elk backstrap, cut into steaks

½ cup sour cream

½ cup Duke’s mayonnaise

1 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

salt, pepper, garlic powder, or Realtree APX all-purpose seasoning

This easy Parmesan steak crust was inspired by a meal we had recently at a nice local restaurant. The topping is simple: Mix sour cream, Duke's mayonnaise (you don't really taste it after it cooks, if you are on the fence about mayo), good Parmesan cheese, and salt, pepper, garlic powder, or Realtree APX all-purpose seasoning. Go with freshly grated real Parmesan for best flavor. Leave the green-top stuff at the store. You will notice the better flavor. I like to put the mix into a zip-top bag and snip the corner, making a handy pastry-bag-style applicator.

Cut the backstrap into 1- to 1.5-inch-thick medallions.

Fire up your pellet grill to 375°F. This gives a nice sear on the backstrap.

Grill the steaks for 4 to 5 minutes per side to get a sear and good exterior color. You don't want to fully cook the steaks at this point, as they will go into the oven in just a minute to sear the Parmesan crust. I like to pull these at 110°F to 115°F to give me a little buffer so that the steaks finish out at 125°F to 130°F for a nice medium rare.

Once the steaks have reached your desired temperature on the grill, pull them and allow them to rest for 5 to 10 minutes to cool. Move the steaks to a baking sheet or roasting pan. Preheat your oven's broiler.

Snip the corner of your Parmesan crust bag and pipe the mixture directly onto the tops of the steaks. I like to go in a circular pattern, but do it however you wish, as long as the steak ends up covered.

Once all the steaks have the Parmesan mixture, slide the pan into the oven and broil for 4 to 6 minutes or until the Parmesan crust has browned slightly and crisped a bit.

Serve the steaks with your favorite side dishes for a meal your family will swear came from a nice restaurant.

HERBED GARLIC BUTTER GRILLED BACKSTRAP

INGREDIENTS

2–2.5 pounds backstrap roast

1½ sticks butter, softened

4–6 cloves garlic, finely chopped

2 teaspoons oregano, chopped

2 teaspoons Italian parsley, chopped

2 teaspoons fresh rosemary, chopped

2 teaspoons balsamic vinegar

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

2 teaspoons black pepper, coarsely ground

1½ teaspoons salt

½ cup white wine

Backstrap on the grill is hard to beat, but cooking it with an herbed-butter coating in a cast-iron skillet on the grill takes it to the next level.

To begin, preheat the pan on the grill to 350°F as you prep the backstrap so that the pan is nice and hot when you put the backstrap in.

Start by mixing 1 stick of softened butter in a bowl along with the remaining ingredients, excluding the wine. Once everything is blended into an herbed butter, coat the backstrap all over with the mixture.

Place the backstrap into the skillet and over to one side. After the backstrap cooks on one side for 6 to 8 minutes, gently flip it over to the center of the skillet for another 6 to 8 minutes.

I like to shoot for 120°F to 125°F internal temperature for a nice rare to medium rare. Remember that the temperature will continue to rise a few more degrees as the backstrap rests. Once the backstrap hits your desired temperature, remove it to a cutting board and loosely cover it with foil to rest.

Add the white wine to the pan and scrape with a wooden spoon to loosen any stuck-on bits. Let the wine come to a boil and reduce by around half.



Remove the skillet from the grill and add the remaining half stick of butter, a tablespoon at a time, stirring after adding each tablespoon until it melts completely before adding the next tablespoon.

Once all of the butter has been added, move the skillet off to the side.

Slice the backstrap into medallions. Spoon over the pan sauce just before serving.



STIR-FRIED ELK PEPPER STEAK

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds elk steak, cut into thin strips

High-temperature oil for stir-frying, such as grapeseed

Salt and pepper to taste

2 bell peppers, seeded and cut into thin strips

2 yellow onions, cut into chunks

1 tablespoon chili flakes

1 teaspoon minced ginger

3 garlic cloves, minced

⅓ cup soy sauce

1½ tablespoons brown or raw sugar

Juice of 1 lime, or 1 tablespoon rice wine vinegar

1½ tablespoons cornstarch, dissolved into 2 tablespoons of cold water

Cooked rice for serving

For this easy stir-fry, I used an elk round steak, cut into thin strips. Any type of venison will also work. Pair it up with sliced bell pepper, some minced garlic, and two onions that you have cut into bite-sized chunks. For the sauce, simply mix in soy sauce, a bit of brown sugar for sweetness, and a splash of lime juice or rice wine vinegar for a bit of acidity to balance.

Start by placing the wok over high heat. Add around 2 tablespoons of a high-temperature oil like grapeseed, peanut, or canola. Once the oil starts to smoke, add the sliced meat, seasoning with salt and pepper. Stir-fry the meat, keeping it in constant motion until it has browned on all sides. Don’t overcook it, because it will go back into the wok later. Remove the browned elk to a warm bowl.

Add more oil if needed. Add the peppers and onions, stir-frying until they start to soften but are still a little crisp when you bite into them. Add the chili flakes, ginger, and garlic, and then cook another minute or two, stirring to keep the garlic from burning on the high heat.

Return the elk to the wok and warm it back through.

Stir in the soy sauce, sugar, and lime juice. Add the cornstarch mixture to the wok, stirring continuously until the sauce begins to boil and thicken.

Serve the stir-fry over cooked white or fried rice.



REVERSE-SEARED SMOKED BACKSTRAP

INGREDIENTS

2-pound section of venison backstrap

2 tablespoons of a high smoke point cooking oil like grapeseed or peanut

STEAKHOUSE-STYLE SPICE RUB

2 teaspoons coarse kosher salt

2 teaspoons brown sugar

1 teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon cornstarch

½ teaspoon garlic powder

½ teaspoon onion powder

½ teaspoon chili powder

½ teaspoon smoked paprika

There is no denying that a slow-smoked backstrap is one of the tastiest meals on the planet. While the steak is fully cooked after the smoking process, the surface isn't caramelized like it would be with a hot sear. The solution is a few seconds in a screaming hot pan to perfectly sear the surface and add even more flavor. I prefer to do my reverse searing outdoors over a gas burner. To really do the method justice, the cast iron needs to be hot enough to cause a ton of smoke when the meat hits it. Unless you have a commercial-grade hood above the range in your kitchen, this method can cause problems indoors.

For an additional layer of flavor, we coat the exterior of the backstrap with a steakhouse-style rub before cooking. Simply blend the rub ingredients in a bowl and sprinkle liberally over the meat. The brown sugar helps to caramelize the surface of the backstrap on the cast iron. After you have seared the meat, give it a few minutes to rest, and then slice across the grain into perfect medium-rare medallions.

Start by trimming away any fat or silver skin from the backstrap. Mix the spice-rub ingredients. Sprinkle the spice rub evenly over all surfaces of the backstrap. Let the meat rest while you heat your grill to 200°F. Grill the backstrap until it hits about 120°F internal temperature.

Once the backstrap has hit the desired temperature, move it to a warm platter and tent with foil. Place a large cast-iron skillet over high heat. Add a tablespoon of a high smoke point cooking oil like grapeseed or peanut oil. Swirl the pan around to spread the oil.

Once the oil begins to smoke, put the backstrap in the skillet. Allow the backstrap to cook for 1 minute without moving it. Flip the backstrap and repeat the process on the opposite side. If your backstrap is thick, repeat the process on the sides of the meat. Return the backstrap to the platter and loosely tent with foil again. Allow the meat to rest for 3 to 5 minutes before slicing.

TERIYAKI VENISON BACKSTRAP SKEWERS

INGREDIENTS

1–2 pounds venison backstrap

2 bell peppers, seeded and cut into chunks

Sliced pineapple

White rice

MARINADE

¾ cup soy sauce

¼ cup cider vinegar

2 tablespoons honey

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1 large shallot, finely chopped

1 clove garlic, minced

½ teaspoon fresh ginger, minced

½ teaspoon black pepper

Mix the marinade ingredients in a 1-gallon zip-top bag before you leave for work that morning. Cut the backstrap into roughly 1-inch chunks and add it to the marinade. Seal the bag and stash it in the refrigerator.

When you get home that evening, fire up the grill and skewer the marinated venison and the bell pepper pieces. Grill for 8 to 10 minutes, turning frequently so that all sides cook evenly.

While the backstrap cooks, add some sliced pineapple to the grill.

To serve, place a skewer or just the cooked meat and peppers atop a serving of white rice. Add a slice or two of grilled pineapple as a side, and you are at the table in less than 20 minutes with a meal the family will love. Can’t beat that for a quick-and-easy dish.



PERSONAL VENISON BACKSTRAP WELLINGTONS

INGREDIENTS

1½ to 2 pounds venison backstrap roast

2 teaspoons kosher salt

1½ teaspoons ground black pepper

¼ teaspoon powdered garlic

2 tablespoons grapeseed or other high-heat oil

4 ounces prosciutto (8–10 pieces, thinly sliced)

¼ cup Dijon mustard

14 ounces phyllo dough, thawed

1 large egg, beaten for egg wash

MUSHROOM DUXELLES

12 ounces mushrooms (e.g., a blend of oyster, cremini, and shiitake)

1 large shallot, diced

1½ teaspoons dried Italian-blend seasoning

Pinch of kosher salt

2 tablespoons butter

½ cup dry white wine

What is a Wellington? It’s seared meat—in this case, seasoned and pan-seared backstrap—surrounded by finely chopped mushroom duxelles, thinly sliced salty prosciutto, and delicate puff pastry.

To make the mushroom duxelles, you can chop the mushrooms into fine bits by hand, but the food processor is much faster and easier. Sauté the chopped mushrooms until they release their moisture and it cooks away, leaving an umami-filled mushroom paste. You can make the duxelles first and keep warm until you assemble the Wellingtons.

Add the mushrooms, diced shallot, seasoning blend, and salt to the food processor. Pulse until the mushrooms are a fine and crumbly texture. Add the butter to a skillet over medium heat. Once the butter melts and starts to brown, add the processed mushrooms. Stir until the mushrooms soften and release their moisture (usually 10 to 15 minutes). As the liquid cooks away, add the white wine. Continue cooking until the wine cooks off. Move the duxelles off the heat to cool slightly.



Season the backstrap roast with salt, pepper, and garlic. Heat the grapeseed oil over medium-high heat. Brown the seasoned backstrap for 1 to 2 minutes per side until it is nicely browned all around. Move the roast from the heat and let it rest for 5 to 10 minutes.

Slice the rested backstrap into four to five individual steaks.

Lay two slices of prosciutto side by side and just slightly overlapping each other. Spread a thin layer of duxelles over the prosciutto.

Spread a thin coat of Dijon mustard over the sliced blackstrap. Place a steak in the center of the prosciutto and wrap it around the meat. Next, working on a lightly floured surface, wrap the backstrap with two thin sheets of phyllo.

Pinch the edges of the pastry together to fully encompass the meat. Place the Wellingtons on a parchment-lined baking sheet, and then chill in the refrigerator for 20 minutes. Brush the tops with beaten egg wash.

Sprinkle with an additional pinch of coarse kosher salt, if desired. Place the baking sheet in a 400°F oven for 18 to 20 minutes until the pastry has puffed up and turned golden brown.

OYSTER MUSHROOM AND VENISON STIR-FRY

INGREDIENTS

1½ pounds venison, sliced into thin strips

¼ cup cornstarch

2 medium or 1 large yellow onion, sliced

1 pound oyster mushrooms, sliced

3–4 green onions, chopped

3 cloves garlic, minced

tablespoon grated fresh ginger

¼ cup peanut or vegetable oil

2 tablespoons soy sauce

2 tablespoons oyster sauce

2 tablespoons chili crisps

Cooked rice or noodles for serving

Additional green onions, chopped, for garnish

Oyster mushrooms are fairly easy to identify. For starters, they almost always grow out of wood, not off the ground. Dead or dying hardwoods are the most common hosts. Their color ranges from white to tan, often

darkening with age. These mushrooms are named for their oyster-shaped cap and normally have an off-center, short, or even nonexistent stem.

Their caps range anywhere from 2 to 10 inches across and grow in a shelflike pattern on the log. One of the first things you should look for when trying to identify this mushroom is the presence of decurrent gills. That just means that the gills are attached to and run directly down the stem, tapering to smooth at the base. The flesh and the gills of the mushroom should be white.

Luckily, there are only a few look-alike mushrooms in the fall woods, and while they might not taste good, most of them aren’t poisonous. As with all wild mushrooms, though, the best bet for a beginning forager is to tag along with someone more experienced for the first few trips. If that isn’t an option, get at least two good guidebooks for mushrooms found in your area and cross-reference any finds to both books.

Oyster mushrooms have a rich, earthy flavor packed full of umami. To me, they taste very similar to spring chanterelle mushrooms. I love to use them in recipes like this stir-fry with venison.



Start by slicing a venison roast into bite-size thin strips. Place the sliced venison in a bowl. Sprinkle the cornstarch over it and blend to evenly coat the meat.

Slice the onion and oyster mushrooms. Chop the green onions and garlic and grate the ginger.

Pour the oil into a wok or large skillet over high heat. Once the oil barely starts to smoke, stir-fry the venison in two batches. It should take only a minute or two per batch to get good color if your oil is hot enough. Move the cooked venison to a warm plate.

Add a tablespoon or so of additional oil to the wok, if necessary. Stir-fry the onions and mushrooms together until both are cooked through.

Return the venison and add the green onions to the wok and stir until it is heated through. Add the garlic and ginger and cook for another 30 to 60 seconds. Add the soy sauce, oyster sauce, and chili crisps (you can find these in most large supermarkets or Asian markets, or you can order online).

Stir well to coat everything with the sauce. Serve with your choice of rice or noodles. Top with chopped green onion as a garnish.

ARGENTINA-STYLE GRILLED MOOSE STEAKS WITH CHIMICHURRI SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

1–2 pounds moose steaks, about 1-inch thick

1½ tablespoons sea salt

1 tablespoon oregano

1 tablespoon paprika

1 tablespoon onion powder

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1 teaspoon dried basil

¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

CHIMICHURRI SAUCE

½ cup olive oil

2 tablespoons red wine vinegar

3 cloves garlic, finely chopped or minced

1 teaspoon red chili pepper flakes

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 teaspoon kosher or coarse sea salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

Moose is one of my favorite game meats. Unfortunately, my area of Kentucky is noticeably lacking in moose-hunting opportunities. So, when the opportunity to cook and eat some presents itself, I jump on it.

For a treat like this one, I lean toward the masters of meat cooking: the Argentinians. Their asado style of cooking meat over fire combined with a distinctive seasoning style makes for a great-tasting steak. To add even more flavor, we topped the steaks with another Argentina favorite: chimichurri sauce. It’s a flavorful blend of parsley, vinegar, and garlic that is perfect for any grilled meat.

Asado style normally gets cooked over an open fire, but a hot bed of coals in a charcoal grill will work nearly as well.

Mix the seasoning blend ingredients and use the rub to liberally season both sides of the moose steaks. Set aside.

In a food processor or mortar and pestle, blend the chimichurri ingredients into a thick sauce. Grill the steaks for 5 to 6 minutes per side, or to your desired doneness level, and then remove from heat and rest, loosely tented with foil, for 5 to 10 minutes. To serve, spoon chimichurri sauce over the steaks.

MEDITERRANEAN GRILLED ELK BACKSTRAP



INGREDIENTS

1–2-pound section of backstrap

RUB

3 cloves garlic, finely chopped

3 tablespoons fresh rosemary, finely chopped

1 tablespoon fresh thyme, finely chopped

1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper

2 teaspoons sea salt

1 teaspoon lemon zest

Juice of 1 lemon

I love Mediterranean flavors on red meat.

Drizzle the meat with a squeeze of fresh lemon juice before applying the rub and grilling to a nice medium rare. Let the backstrap rest a few minutes before slicing.

Here, I used a section of elk backstrap, but whitetail or mule deer is great, too. You can even use this rub on wild pig or grilled turkey breast. The blend of fresh herbs and garlic offers just enough flavor without overseasoning the meat.

Start by mixing the rub ingredients. Set aside. Allow the backstrap to come to near room temperature. Squeeze a lemon over the meat and rub it to coat all surfaces. Sprinkle over the rub to cover all surfaces of the meat. This rub is chunky, so don’t be afraid to really pile it on for extra flavor and a nice crust on your backstrap.

Grill the backstrap to your liking over high heat, turning halfway through the cooking process.

Serve these steaks with rice or potatoes and grilled vegetables.

ELK ROAST WITH DUCK FAT YORKSHIRE PUDDINGS AND GRAVY

INGREDIENTS

3–4 pounds elk roast, top or bottom round or a combination

1 cup duck fat

2 carrots, roughly chopped

2 stalks celery, roughly chopped

2 yellow onions, quartered

2 cloves garlic, lightly smashed

SPICE RUB

1 tablespoon finely ground coffee

1 tablespoon sea or kosher salt

1 teaspoon brown sugar

1 teaspoon smoked paprika

½ teaspoon garlic powder

½ teaspoon white pepper

YORKSHIRE PUDDING POPOVERS

3 large eggs

1½ cups milk

1½ cups all-purpose flour

¾ teaspoon salt

3 tablespoons rendered duck fat pan drippings

GRAVY

½ cup duck fat pan drippings, strained

1 medium shallot, finely diced

4 tablespoons all-purpose flour

2 cups beef stock

½ cup red wine

Before cooking, use butcher’s twine to tie the roast into a tight round shape for even cooking. Cover the meat with duck fat, and then add a spice rub featuring finely ground coffee for a base.

The difference between popovers and traditional Yorkshire pudding is that the former tends to use melted butter in the pan with the batter, whereas Yorkshire pudding uses pan drippings from the roast. You will often find the two terms used interchangeably, regardless of the fat used in cooking.

You can use a standard muffin pan for the Yorkshire puddings, but a dedicated popover pan with deeper, narrower cups makes for a taller, fluffier roll.



Start by mixing the batter for the Yorkshire puddings. Refrigerate until ready for use. You can even make the batter the night before. Simply stir the eggs and milk into the flour and salt. Use a whisk to blend well until all lumps are gone.

For the roast, use butcher’s twine to tie the roast into a tight, round shape. Use a few tablespoons of the duck fat to coat the roast. Mix the seasoning rub and sprinkle all over the roast.

To a large roasting pan, add remaining duck fat along with the carrots, celery, onions, and garlic. Place a roasting rack over the vegetables and add the seasoned elk roast. Roast in a preheated 375°F oven to an internal temperature of 130°F. Remove the roast and cover with foil. Place it in a warm spot while you make the popovers and gravy.

Add a spoonful of the pan drippings from the roast to each popover cup. Pour the Yorkshire pudding batter over the pan drippings, filling each cup around two-thirds of the way to allow room for expansion. Bake for 30 minutes at 375°F.

While the puddings cook, make the gravy on the stovetop. To a saucepan over medium-high heat, add a half cup of the reserved pan drippings. Add the diced shallot. Sauté for 5 to 8 minutes until the shallot is cooked through and translucent. Sprinkle on the flour and stir well.

Cook the flour until it takes on a light peanut butter color. Add the beef stock and red wine and bring the mixture to a boil, stirring often as it thickens.

Slice the roast and ladle over gravy before serving alongside a popover.

MULEY CALDILLO (MEXICAN-STYLE MULE DEER STEW)

INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons lard or vegetable oil

2½ pounds mule deer roast, cut into 1-inch cubes

2 medium onions, roughly diced

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 10-ounce can Rotel tomatoes with green chilis

1 14-ounce can fire-roasted tomatoes

1 8-ounce can Roasted Hatch Green Chile peppers 1 cup tomato salsa

1½ cups salsa verde

1 cup chicken broth

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon pepper

1 teaspoon cumin

1½ pounds red potatoes, skin on, cut into 1-inch cubes

16-ounce bag of frozen sweet corn

Lime wedges and tortillas for serving

This caldillo recipe blends slow-simmered mule deer with salsas, roasted peppers, fire-roasted tomatoes, potatoes, and other vegetables to make an extremely flavorful stew that instantly transports me back to Western hunts. We serve the stew with lime wedges for squeezing and warm corn tortillas for soaking up every last bit of the broth.

In a large cast-iron Dutch oven or heavy pot, heat the oil or lard over medium-high heat. Add the mule deer and brown the meat, stirring often.

Once the meat is well browned, add the onions and cook until they begin to soften. Add the remaining ingredients except for the potatoes and corn. Bring to a simmer and cook for 60 minutes.

Add the potatoes and corn and continue cooking for another 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Serve with a lime wedge and warm corn tortillas.



GARLIC-BUTTER BACKSTRAP AND MUSHROOMS

INGREDIENTS

1 pound backstrap cut into 1-inch pieces

3 tablespoons ghee

Salt and pepper to taste

1 pound mushrooms, sliced

2 tablespoons salted butter

4 garlic cloves, minced

Parsley for garnish

Whenever we trim up an entire backstrap, there are always a few bits and pieces left that are too small to use. We save these for quick-and-easy recipes like this one.

Don’t overcrowd the skillet. For this dish, we brown the meat in ghee (clarified butter that has all the milk solids filtered out so it has a higher smoke point) and then finish with regular butter for a creamy texture.

Start with a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the ghee. Season the meat with salt and pepper. Once the ghee is up to temperature, add the seasoned meat, taking care not to overcrowd the pan. Brown well on all sides, repeating with additional batches if needed.

After all of the meat has browned, remove it from the pan and reduce the heat to medium. Add the sliced mushrooms. Season well with salt. Cook the mushrooms, stirring often, until they have released their moisture and the liquid has evaporated away (around 20 minutes for this batch).

Return the meat to the pan with the mushrooms and add the butter and garlic. Stir to combine and coat well with garlic butter. Cook for another 5 minutes, and then serve over noodles or rice. Garnish with chopped parsley if desired.

Tip: Reduce the heat before you add the garlic to the pan so that it doesn’t burn and get bitter.

The Grind

Ground venison is a versatile freezer staple for more than just tacos and burgers, although both of those options rank pretty high on our dinner list. Here are a few of my favorite ways to use ground venison.



GRILLED VENISON BARBECUE SHOTGUN SHELLS

INGREDIENTS

1 pound ground venison

1 pound ground breakfast sausage

1 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese

1 tablespoon Myron Mixon Original BBQ Rub

Two 8-ounce boxes of manicotti pasta, uncooked (you will need 16 to 20 shells)

1 pound sliced bacon—the thinner, the better (you might need more, depending on number of slices in package)

¼ cup Myron Mixon Hickory BBQ Sauce, plus more for grilling

I’m not one to turn down a tasty-looking recipe that is trending on social media. If you follow any cooking pages or groups, you’ve probably seen this recipe. Uncooked manicotti shells get stuffed with cooked ground meat, wrapped in bacon, and grilled.

I immediately made it with ground venison. Start by browning the venison and sausage in a large skillet. Once the meat has browned, drain any accumulated fat from the sausage. Add the cheese and BBQ rub and stir to combine.

Use a spoon to completely fill the uncooked shells with the meat mixture. Take care not to break the shells. For a better finished texture on the pasta,

I’ve found it best to fill the tubes, go ahead and wrap them in bacon, and then refrigerate for 4 to 8 hours to let the pasta absorb some of the moisture from the meat filling and bacon. Then they go onto the grill and get brushed with a bit more BBQ sauce for a glaze. We served these as appetizers, and they were a huge hit. These would be perfect for tailgating, since you can do all the prep work at home before tossing them on the grill to cook the bacon and heat the filling.

Grill for 15 to 20 minutes or until the bacon is cooked through, turning often and brushing with BBQ sauce after each turn.

UPSIDE-DOWN DEEP-DISH CAST-IRON VENISON PIZZA

INGREDIENTS

1 pound ground venison

2 cups pizza sauce

6 ounces pepperoni

Sliced banana peppers

8 ounces sliced mushrooms, precooked

8 ounces sliced provolone cheese

8 ounces shredded whole milk mozzarella or Italian-blend cheese

Homemade or premade pizza crust

Olive oil

You will build this pizza from the bottom up. Brown a pound of ground venison and add 1 cup of your favorite pizza sauce. Set that aside.

Start with a 12-inch cast-iron skillet. Spray it down well with nonstick vegetable oil spray, or coat it all over with butter. Like I say, we're building this pizza upside down, so you don't want things to stick when you flip it over for serving. In the bottom of the skillet, add a single layer of the toppings of your choice. For this one, I used pepperoni, banana peppers, and mushrooms that I sautéed in a little butter.

Next, add some cheese, for that traditional deep-dish Chicago style. I started with sliced provolone. Don’t go crazy. A single layer of cheese will do. There will be a lot more to come as we continue to build.

Next, sprinkle on a light layer of shredded whole milk mozzarella or Italian-blend cheese. Top that with a layer of the browned and sauced ground venison.



After that, repeat the process. I like to go at least two layers. That’s why we didn’t go super thick on the first round. Finally, top everything with the crust, sealing it tight to the edges of the skillet.

Brush the top with olive oil. Use a knife to cut a few vent holes in the crust to allow the steam to release as the pizza bakes. Bake at 400°F for 25 minutes.

Remove the pizza and let it rest for 5 to 10 minutes. Run a knife around the edge of the pizza to release the crust from the skillet. Cover the pizza with a baking sheet, and carefully flip it over to let the pizza fall out onto the baking sheet so that the crust is now on the bottom. Return the pizza to the oven to bake for another 5 to 10 minutes.

LOADED VENISON TACO BAKED POTATO

INGREDIENTS



2–3 baked potatoes

Olive or vegetable oil

Salt and pepper

1 pound ground venison

1 pack taco seasoning

4 ounces roasted and chopped green Hatch chile peppers

Water

1 cup queso cheese sauce

1 cup salsa

Chopped fresh chives

Shredded lettuce

Sour cream

Rinse two or three large potatoes and poke them a few times with a fork. Lightly coat the skin with olive or vegetable oil, and then salt and pepper well.

While the potatoes bake, cook 1 pound of ground venison (or ground turkey legs, which also work great for this recipe). Add a packet of your favorite taco seasoning, 4 ounces of chopped green peppers for extra flavor, and just enough water to make everything moist. While that simmers, make your own cheese sauce or heat up your favorite store-bought queso or nacho cheese.

To serve, split the potato, spoon on some ground venison, and then top with queso. Add salsa, chopped chives, a little shredded lettuce if you like, and a dollop of sour cream.

Tip: An air fryer turns out perfectly baked potatoes in less time than the oven. Place the potatoes in your air fryer basket, leaving a little space between, and cook at 400°F for 30 minutes. Flip the potatoes and give them another 10 minutes if they need it.

VENISON NACHO SAUSAGE BALLS

INGREDIENTS

2 cups Nacho Cheese Doritos, crushed (around a 9-ounce bag)

1 pound ground venison or ground venison/bacon blend

1 pound pork chorizo sausage

4 cups shredded cheese

2 cups all-purpose baking mix (Bisquick)

1–2 tablespoons taco seasoning

2 cups salsa

DIPPING SAUCE

1 cup sour cream

1 cup salsa

1 tablespoon taco seasoning

A good sausage ball appetizer needs a few things: good meat, good seasoning, and a good binder. Binders can be things such as cracker crumbs, breadcrumbs, or finely grated cheese.

But what if we use a binder that also offers up a kick of extra flavor? For this recipe, I used Nacho Cheese Doritos that I ran through the food processor to give them a finer texture.

For the meat, I used a mix of venison that I had ground with some bacon at an 80/20 ratio and an equal amount of pork chorizo sausage. To hold everything together, I used an all-purpose baking mix. Finish it off with plenty of shredded cheese, cheddar, or a blend of your favorites, and you have the makings of a fine sausage ball.

Start by processing the chips. If you don’t have a food processor handy, add the chips to a zip-top bag and crush them into a fine powder with a mallet or rolling pin. Add the venison and sausage to a large bowl. Pour in the crushed chips, shredded cheese, baking mix, and taco seasoning. You will need a little moisture to get it mixed. For extra flavor, I went with thin salsa. Blend everything well by hand or with a stand mixer.

Once all the ingredients are well incorporated, roll into 1.5-inch balls, roughly the size of a golf ball. Place the balls on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper and transfer to a 350°F oven.

Bake for 15 minutes or until just cooked through. While the sausage balls cook, mix the dipping sauce ingredients. Serve warm with sauce.

While they bake, mix the dipping sauce by blending sour cream, salsa, and taco seasoning to taste.

AIR FRYER VENISON MEATBALLS

INGREDIENTS

16 ounces ground venison

4 ounces ground pork

3 tablespoons zesty Italian dressing

½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

⅓ cup Italian-seasoned breadcrumbs

1 large egg

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon Italian seasoning

1 teaspoon salt

Shredded mozzarella cheese and chopped basil for topping (optional)

One of the easiest ways to make these is with an air fryer.

A good meatball needs a binder to hold it together. This one uses an egg, breadcrumbs, and grated Parmesan cheese to bind everything and add flavor.

Start by mixing all ingredients in a large bowl. I like to blend some ground pork with the venison for better texture. The Italian dressing also helps to

add flavor and makes for a smooth and juicy finished product. Blend well until everything is fully combined.

Separate the mixture, and roll into 12 to 14 equal-sized meatballs.

Preheat the air fryer to 350°F. Place the meatballs onto the tray, splitting them into two batches, if necessary, to keep a small air space between the meatballs. Cook for 6 to 7 minutes, and then roll the meatballs over on the tray and continue cooking for another 3 to 5 minutes.

Shoot for around 145°F internal temperature for the largest meatball in the batch. Top the meatballs with shredded cheese and finely chopped basil, if serving by themselves, or add to pasta and top with sauce.





VENISON CRUNCHY TACO CUP APPETIZERS

INGREDIENTS

1 pound ground venison

2 teaspoons olive oil

2 tablespoons taco seasoning

1 14-ounce can fire-roasted diced tomatoes, drained

Salt to taste

Nonstick cooking spray

24 wonton wrappers

1½ cups shredded cheddar cheese

Sour cream

Sliced green onions

Fresh tomatoes, diced

Make these simple taco cup appetizers with wonton wrappers, which you can usually find in the refrigerated section of your local market. They cook fast and get nice and crispy in the oven.

Start by browning the ground venison in a large skillet in olive oil. Add the taco seasoning, fire-roasted tomatoes, and salt.

Stir and bring to a boil, and then reduce heat to a simmer and continue stirring until the meat soaks up the moisture from the tomatoes.

Coat the cups of a muffin tin with nonstick spray or use a nonstick silicone version. Place a wonton wrapper in the bottom of each cup.

Spoon in a little of the seasoned meat mixture, and then top it off with a tablespoon or so of shredded cheese.

Top the cheese with a second wonton layer, oriented so that the corners don’t line up with the first wrapper. Repeat with a second spoonful of meat and more cheese. Continue filling the cups until you have used all of the meat mixture.

Place the muffin tin in a preheated 350°F oven. Bake for 15 to 20 minutes or until the cheese has melted and the wonton wrappers are crispy and golden brown.

Top with a dollop of sour cream and green onion and tomato just before serving. This recipe makes 12 individual cups, but you can easily double or

triple it to serve a crowd.

VENISON ZUPPA TOSCANA SOUP

INGREDIENTS

4 strips thick-cut bacon, cut into ½-inch pieces

1 pound ground venison

1 large yellow onion, diced

1 tablespoon dried

Italian-seasoning blend

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

3 cloves garlic, minced

2 pounds red potatoes, halved or quartered depending on size

8 cups chicken broth

3 cups curly kale, stems removed and leaves roughly chopped

3 cups fresh dandelion greens, stems removed and roughly chopped

1 cup heavy cream

½ cup sour cream

Pinch of crushed red pepper flakes

1 teaspoon white wine vinegar

Freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese for topping

Our version of this classic soup substitutes ground venison for the traditional Italian sausage. We found nice dandelion greens at a local farmer’s market, so we substituted those for half of the traditional kale in the recipe. If you can’t find fresh dandelion greens, simply use all kale or a blend of kale and fresh spinach.

We top the soup with freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese. If your Parmesan cheese of choice has always come from a green plastic jar, give the real thing a try. You’ll be amazed at the depth of flavor. In order to be labeled Parmigiano Reggiano, the Parmesan cheese has to be made in a particular region of Italy with prime ingredients and aged for at least 1 year before being sold. It’s worth the extra money.

Start the soup by rendering the bacon in a large Dutch oven until crisp. Remove the bacon from the pan and set aside.

Add the ground venison and onion to the bacon drippings. Add the Italian seasoning blend and salt and pepper to taste. Cook until the venison is browned through and the onions are soft and translucent—about 10 minutes or so. Add the garlic and continue to cook for another 3 to 5 minutes. Remove the venison and onions from the pot and set aside.



Quarter or halve the red potatoes. Add the chicken stock and potatoes. Bring the mixture to a boil, and then reduce heat to simmer. Cook, covered, until the potatoes are tender (around 25 to 30 minutes). Add the greens and continue cooking until they are tender.

Return the venison and bacon to the pot. Add the heavy cream, sour cream, and red pepper flakes. Stir to blend. Add the white wine vinegar and check for seasoning. Add salt if needed. Serve topped with freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese.



GROUND ELK DAN DAN NOODLES

INGREDIENTS

1½ cups chicken or wild turkey broth

½ cup soy sauce

⅓ cup creamy peanut butter

1 tablespoon brown sugar

1 tablespoon cornstarch

1 tablespoon rice vinegar

1 tablespoon sesame oil

1 tablespoon hot sauce

2 teaspoons chili sauce or chili crisps in oil

1 pound ground elk or other wild game meat

16 ounces udon or other noodles

2 cloves garlic, finely chopped

1 teaspoon ground ginger

1 teaspoon sea or kosher salt

2 cups fresh spinach

Garnish with sesame seeds and julienne-cut raw spinach

We used udon noodles for this wild game version of the classic Chinese take-out dish, but go with whatever's your favorite. Even spaghetti will work in a pinch. For this recipe, we used ground elk, but any ground wild game works well.

Set a pot of water to boil as you make the sauce. Mix the broth, soy sauce, peanut butter, brown sugar, cornstarch, rice vinegar, sesame oil, hot sauce, and chili sauce or chili crisps until smooth. Set aside.

Brown the ground venison in a large skillet until cooked through. Meanwhile, cook noodles in the pot of boiling water according to package instructions. Once the meat has browned, reduce heat to low and add garlic, ginger, and salt. Stir well. Return heat to medium-high. Add the spinach and sauce.

Stir well. Cook 3 to 5 minutes until the spinach has wilted and the sauce has thickened.

Add the noodles to the pan and toss to blend. Garnish with sesame seeds and thin strips of raw spinach just before serving.

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WILD TURKEY

SO MANY HUNTERS KEEP ONLY THE BREAST MEAT from their turkeys, leaving the rest behind in the woods. With proper care and cooking methods, the legs and thighs can be delicious. And don’t forget the heart, livers, and gizzards. All of these little tidbits are tasty parts of the wild turkey. While many of the recipes in this chapter deal with breast and leg meat, I added a few of my favorites to use every edible part of your bird.

WILD TURKEY PICCATA

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast, sliced

2 teaspoons each kosher salt and black pepper, plus more for seasoning

1 cup all-purpose flour

½ cup finely grated Parmesan cheese, plus more for serving

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 stick butter, divided

1 cup chicken stock

1 cup dry white wine

4 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

½ cup capers, drained

2 tablespoons chopped parsley

Cooked spaghetti for serving

Start by slicing the turkey breast, against the grain, into half-inch-thick cutlets. Place the cutlets, one at a time, into a gallon-sized plastic bag or between two sheets of plastic wrap. Pound them down with a meat mallet until they are around a quarter-inch in thickness.

Once you have flattened the turkey, season it lightly on both sides with salt and pepper. In a shallow dish, mix the flour, two teaspoons each of salt and

pepper, and a half cup of good Parmesan cheese that has been freshly (and finely) grated.

Dredge the turkey in the flour mixture, shaking off the excess.

Heat the olive oil and around 2 tablespoons of butter in a large skillet. Once the oil is hot, fry the turkey (in batches if necessary to prevent overcrowding the pan) until golden brown and crisp on the surface and just cooked through. Roughly 3 minutes per side should do it. Move the turkey to a wire rack over a sheet pan and hold warm in a 200°F oven while you work on the sauce.



Drain the oil from the skillet and return it to medium heat. Add the chicken stock and white wine, or use straight chicken stock if desired. Add the lemon juice and bring the mixture to a boil, reducing by around half. Add the capers and heat through. Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the

remaining butter, around a tablespoon at a time. Melt each pat before adding the next. This will thicken the sauce and add richness to it.

Serve the fried turkey breast over a bed of cooked pasta, and then top with a generous amount of the sauce. Garnish with additional Parmesan cheese and chopped parsley before serving.



STICKY PINEAPPLE TURKEY TENDERLOINS

INGREDIENTS

6 turkey tenderloins, tendon removed and cut into bite-sized pieces

Seasoned salt

Black pepper

2 cups cornstarch

2 cans pineapple chunks with juice

1 cup roasted red bell peppers, chopped

½ cup soy sauce

1 tablespoon rice wine vinegar

¼ cup honey

1 tablespoon red pepper flakes

2 cloves garlic minced

1 teaspoon ginger, grated

While this recipe is called “Sticky Pineapple Turkey Tenderloins,” it works just as well with regular breast meat cut into bite-sized pieces if you don’t have a package of tenderloins handy.

The pineapple in the recipe gives it a sweet, tropical flavor, and the roasted red bell peppers add a nice balancing flavor to the pineapple. The honey and the soy sauce complement each other for a sweet-and-salty finish with each bite. Serve it up over a bed of white rice, and you have a complete meal.

I like to coat the turkey in cornstarch for this one before frying it crisp. The cornstarch gives a lighter coating than flour and retains a nice crunch even in the sauce.

Start by cutting up the meat. Season it well with seasoned salt and black pepper. Add 2 cups of cornstarch to a shallow container. Heat ¼ cup of oil in a 12-inch skillet over medium heat (if using a larger or smaller skillet, add sufficient oil to fill ⅛ inch of the pan). Once the oil is hot, toss around half of the seasoned meat in the cornstarch. Move the dredged meat over to the hot oil, taking care not to overcrowd the pan. Fry for 2 to 3 minutes per side or until crispy and golden brown. Remove the fried turkey to a platter and cover with foil to keep it warm while you fry the remaining meat.

Once all the turkey is cooked, add the pineapple chunks (with juice) to the pan. Add the chopped roasted red bell peppers. Bring the mixture to a

simmer and scrape the bottom of the pan to loosen any stuck-on bits. Those equal flavor.

Add the soy sauce, vinegar, honey, red pepper flakes, garlic, and ginger to the sauce. Check for seasoning and add more seasoned salt if needed. Return the turkey and stir well to evenly coat the meat with the sauce.

Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook for another 5 to 10 minutes (or until the sauce starts to thicken). Serve over white rice.

EXTRA-CRISPY RESTAURANT-STYLE WILD TURKEY FINGERS

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast, cut into chicken finger-sized strips

Oil for frying

Dipping sauce of choice

DREDGE

2 cups all-purpose flour, plus another cup reserved

¼ cup onion powder

¼ cup garlic powder

¼ cup black pepper

¼ cup paprika

¼ cup salt

1 tablespoon white pepper

1 tablespoon seasoning salt

1 teaspoon each, ginger and mustard powder

Additional seasoning salt for the turkey

BATTER

2 eggs

½ cup flour

1 cup milk

You ever bite into a really good restaurant chicken finger and get that explosive crunch followed by tons of flavor? With this recipe, you can turn out a super crunchy, extremely flavorful fried wild turkey finger that will blow the doors off anything you get at a restaurant.

Start by mixing the batter and sticking it back into the refrigerator. The colder it is, the better the finished product.

Heat at least 2 inches of oil in a deep skillet or heavy pot. You want the oil to be between 350°F and 360°F when you drop in the turkey.

Mix two cups of flour with the onion powder, garlic powder, black pepper, paprika, salt, white pepper, seasoning salt, ginger, and mustard powder. Stir well.

Season the turkey fingers with seasoning salt, both sides. Add 1 cup of plain flour to a shallow dish. Dredge the seasoned turkey lightly in the plain flour, then into the chilled batter, and then into the seasoned flour.

Scoop some of the seasoned flour mixture up and onto the turkey finger. You want it really thick. Gently move it to the side without shaking off any excess flour, and then repeat the process until you have just enough turkey battered to fit in your pan without overcrowding. Gently lower each piece into the hot oil and fry for 6 to 10 minutes (or until cooked through). Move the fried turkey to a wire rack to drain while you repeat with remaining turkey. Don’t batter the next round until right before you are ready to fry.

HOT HONEY–DRIZZLED WILD TURKEY BISCUITS

INGREDIENTS

Lard or oil for frying

1–2 pounds wild turkey breast, sliced into ½-inch cutlets

1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning

2 cups seasoned flour

Mike’s Hot Honey

BISCUITS

2 cups White Lily Self-Rising Flour

6 tablespoons butter, cut into small bits and chilled

¾ cup buttermilk

A good recipe is all about balance. This one has salt and butter from the biscuit, savory spice from the seasoned flour on the turkey breast, and sweet and spice from Mike’s Hot Honey. It’s a match made in heaven.

Start by making your biscuits. Preheat your oven to 450°F. This recipe makes eight good-sized biscuits. Start with self-rising flour. I prefer the White Lily brand, but whatever self-rising flour you use is probably fine.

Next, you will need some fat. You can use shortening or lard, but I like butter for these. Take 6 tablespoons of butter and cut them into small cubes. Move them to the freezer for a few minutes. Cold butter (or whatever fat you are using) is crucial to a good biscuit with a tender, pillowy center.

Finally, you will need some buttermilk. I like whole buttermilk for the extra creaminess, but low-fat will work.

The most important part of a good biscuit is not overworking the dough. Add the flour to a large bowl and then add the chilled butter and spread it around evenly. Use a dough cutter or fork to work the butter into the flour until it is roughly pea sized and worked evenly throughout the flour. Pour in most of the buttermilk. Hold a little back and add at the end if your dough is too dry.

Use your fingers or a wooden spoon to blend the buttermilk into the flour. Just work it enough that everything is evenly mixed, taking care not to overwork. If you need to add the remaining buttermilk to make the dough workable, do so now.

When the dough is mixed into a ball, turn it out onto a floured surface. Roll to around a ½ inch thick, and then fold onto itself. Roll again, and fold once more, and then form back into a circle and roll to ¾ inch in thickness. Use a glass (a 12-ounce rocks glass is just about perfect) or a biscuit cutter to cut out the biscuits. Roll the scraps, flatten, and cut one final biscuit out.



I like to bake my biscuits in a cast-iron skillet, but you can also use a sheet pan. Lightly butter whatever cooking vessel you choose, and place the biscuits in, just touching. Place the biscuits in the oven and bake until golden brown on top (around 15 minutes). You can brush the surface with melted butter before placing into the oven if you prefer a browner top.

While the biscuits bake, heat a quarter inch of lard or oil in a cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Slice the turkey breasts into half-inch-thick cutlets. If you want them to be a bit more tender (say, you killed an old boss tom with 1.5-inch hooks and more battle scars than a jackrabbit living in a cactus pile), pound the cutlets with a meat mallet.

Season the turkey on both sides with Cajun seasoning blend, and then dust well with your favorite seasoned flour blend—I use Kentucky Kernel—or in flour seasoned with Cajun seasoning and whatever spices you like.

When the oil is hot enough to shimmer and smoke a little, gently lower the floured turkey into the grease. Don’t overcrowd the pan. Do these in batches if you need to. Fry to a crisp golden brown and just cooked through, around three to four minutes per side, depending on thickness. Don’t overcook your wild turkey. Shoot for 155°F or so internal temperature so that it remains nice and juicy.

After the biscuits are done, simply split them and lay on a piece of fried turkey breast. Drizzle over the Mike’s Hot Honey for a touch of sweet heat that really elevates the traditional turkey biscuit. Enjoy for breakfast, brunch, or even dinner!

TERIYAKI WILD TURKEY AND BACON KEBABS

INGREDIENTS

1–2 pounds wild turkey breast, cut into 1-inch or slightly larger cubes

1 pineapple, cored and cut into cubes

1 pound mini sweet bell peppers

2 sweet onions, cut into 1½-inch squares

8 ounces thick-cut applewood smoked bacon

Metal or bamboo skewers

Teriyaki sauce for basting and for final drizzle

White rice

MARINADE

2 tablespoons cornstarch

1 cup water

½ cup brown sugar

½ cup soy sauce

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 tablespoon rice wine vinegar

2 teaspoons ginger, minced

1 teaspoon sesame oil

This recipe uses wild turkey breast with the classic sweet-and-savory flavors of teriyaki.

Start by cutting the turkey breast into roughly 1- to 1.5-inch cubes.

Place the turkey into a zip-top bag and add the marinade ingredients. Massage the bag to blend the marinade ingredients and fully coat the turkey breast. Marinate in the refrigerator for 4 to 6 hours.

I like to use fresh pineapple for this recipe, but canned is okay if you can find large chunks.

Pair the marinated turkey and pineapple with sweet mini peppers that you have seeded. (If you can’t find those, regular bell peppers cut into 1.5-inch squares work well.) Do the same for the sweet onions. The final addition to the skewers is thick-cut applewood smoked bacon. I slice it into roughly 1.5-inch sections and put two together for a nice bite. The saltiness of the bacon balances the sweetness of the pineapple.

Alternate each ingredient on metal or bamboo skewers, and then place on a preheated grill set to 350°F. Grill for 15 to 20 minutes, glazing every 5 minutes or so with your favorite teriyaki sauce, or until the turkey and bacon are cooked through and the peppers and onions have started to soften. I like to serve these with white rice for a full meal. Drizzle over additional teriyaki before serving, if desired.



CIDER-BRINED WILD TURKEY BREAST

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast

2 quarts apple cider

½ cup kosher salt

Salt and pepper to taste

1 tablespoon dried Herbes de Provence

For me, apple cider is the perfect fall flavor. It’s not just for drinking. A good cider is the ideal base for brining your wild turkey breast before you toss it on your grill. Since brines are just liquid with salt and usually a bit of sweetener, the cider knocks out two of the requirements in one. I just add around a half cup of kosher salt to enough cider to cover the turkey and let it brine overnight in the refrigerator.

The result is a tender and juicy turkey breast with just a touch of apple sweetness. Serve it up with some dressing, a vegetable, and some homemade cranberry sauce (try mixing a pound of ripe fresh cranberries with a half cup each of brown sugar and bourbon and then bringing it to a simmer, adding a teaspoon of lemon juice, and cooking until it thickens into a nice sauce), and you have a wild Thanksgiving meal the entire family will love.

Start with one side of a wild turkey breast and around a quart of good apple cider and stir in the kosher salt until it dissolves. Place the turkey breast in a glass or plastic container deep enough to fully cover the breast with the brine. Pour over the salted brine, and then add enough cider to fully cover the turkey. Cover and place in the refrigerator overnight.

When you are ready, heat your grill to 325°F. Remove the turkey from the brine and pat dry. Season with salt, pepper, and dried Herbes de Province (a blend of savory, marjoram, rosemary, and thyme available at your local supermarket).

Place the turkey on the grill for 45 to 60 minutes or until it reaches 150°F to 155°F in the thickest section. Once the turkey reaches temperature, remove from grill, cover with foil, and rest for 10 minutes.

Slice thinly, against the grain, for serving. I like to serve over a bed of dressing, surrounded by roasted Brussels sprouts, and topped with cranberry sauce.

SMOKED BBQ WILD TURKEY BREAST

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast

Butcher’s twine

3 tablespoons ranch dressing

2 tablespoons BBQ rub

1 cup BBQ sauce

BRINE

3 quarts water

¾ cup kosher salt

¾ cup brown or raw sugar

1 tablespoon black peppercorns

1 teaspoon whole mustard seeds

½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

For this recipe, I plucked the turkey breast and left the skin on. It takes just a few minutes, and the skin adds tons of flavor to the finished product. Will it look perfect? Probably not. I usually end up tearing the skin as I pluck,

but don’t worry—it still tastes good, even if it doesn’t perfectly cover the entirety of the meat.

Wild turkey is lean. Really lean. That means it can dry out with slow-cooking processes like smoking. To battle that issue, we give the breast an overnight brine. That helps add flavor and moisture to the meat.

Start by brining the meat in the refrigerator overnight in 3 quarts of water with ¾ cup kosher salt, ¾ cup brown or raw sugar, 1 tablespoon black peppercorns, 1 teaspoon mustard seed, and ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes. Stir the entire mixture until the salt and sugar dissolve, and then add the breast. Cover and refrigerate.

Once the meat has finished brining, give it a quick rinse and pat dry. Roll the thin end under itself and use butcher’s twine to tie it into a tight roast. Rub the meat all over with ranch dressing both as a binder and to add a bit of zip. Shake on your favorite BBQ rub to heavily coat the turkey.



Place the meat on the smoker at 225°F. Roughly an hour in, brush on your favorite BBQ sauce. Repeat this step two more times as the meat smokes. Once the meat hits 150°F, remove the meat from the grill and loosely tent with foil to rest for 10 minutes before slicing.

Serve as is for a main course and save any leftovers for an awesome sandwich.

Tip: Look at a wild turkey breast—one end is pretty thick, while the other is thin. To keep the thin end from drying out before the thick end comes to temperature, I like to fold the thin side under and tie the breast into a roast using butcher’s twine. That helps the meat cook evenly and finish at the same time without drying out.

SOUS VIDE HERBED TURKEY BREAST

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast

2 teaspoons kosher salt

1 teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 teaspoon dried thyme

1 teaspoon honey

2 tablespoons bacon grease

What is sous vide cooking? It means “under vacuum.” You seal the food in plastic, either a heavy-duty zip-top bag or a vacuum-sealed package, and then immerse it in moving water set at the desired temperature you wish to achieve in your food. This approach has a few important advantages over other cooking methods.

First, because the water circulates and never rises above the preset temperature, the meat cooks slowly, without drying out. You can leave a turkey breast sous vide for hours, and the meat will never rise above whatever you have set on your sous vide cooker.

Next, moisture can’t escape the way it does in an oven or on a grill. Finally, taking advantage of the sealed bag, you can add some flavorful fat to the lean turkey breast—in this case, reserved bacon grease. Since the water never comes into contact with the meat, the fat cooks the meat, adding a bit of moisture to it as it does.

Fill a container (a large pot or plastic tub works well) with cold water. Insert your sous vide unit into the water and fasten it to the side of your container. Set the temperature to 150°F and allow the water to reach temperature before starting the cook.

Pat the surface of the meat dry. Season with salt, pepper, garlic powder, oregano, and thyme. Place the meat in a zip-top or vacuum-seal bag. Add a teaspoon of honey and 2 tablespoons of bacon grease from the jar you keep in the refrigerator.

Don’t have a bacon grease jar? Get one. In the meantime, just cook some bacon and snack on it while the turkey cooks. Let the drippings cool before adding them to the bag with the turkey. Seal everything up tight, squeezing out excess air if using a zip-top bag.

Add the bag to the preheated water. Use a stoneware or ceramic cup or plate to weigh the bag down if it wants to float. You want it completely submerged in the water. That’s it. Go do something else for 3 to 4 hours. Check on things every now and then to make sure your temperature is holding steady at 150°F, but you don’t have to do anything to the meat.

The one downside to sous vide cooking is that the surface of the meat never comes into contact with hot, dry air. That leaves the surface a bit pale and not overly attractive. Get around this issue by heating a cast-iron skillet over a medium-high burner. Once the skillet is hot and the sous vide cooking is complete, add the turkey. Sear one side for about 2 minutes, and then flip it and do the opposite side. This gives the turkey a nice caramelized brown exterior and adds another layer of flavor.

You don’t really need to rest this one. Give it a minute or two, and slice thinly. Serve as is or use it to make a killer sandwich.



DEEP-FRIED WILD TURKEY BREAST

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast, with skin if possible

1 pint Zatarain’s Creole Butter injection

2 tablespoons Cajun seasoning

2 cups Kentucky Kernel or other seasoned flour mix

Oil for deep-frying

This recipe is a slightly different take on the traditional fried turkey. Instead of cutting the meat into thin strips, I deep-fried one whole side of a breast. To prevent the meat from drying out as it cooked, I first injected the breast with Zatarain’s Creole Butter injection. I then hit the surface of the meat with a liberal shake of Cajun seasoning.

Next, roll the seasoned breast in your favorite seasoned flour or chicken breading mixture to evenly coat all surfaces.

Most hunters simply skin out their turkeys. But you can pluck at least the breast portion in a few minutes to leave the skin on. Just like fried chicken, the skin adds tons of flavor and crunch to the finished dish. If you’ve already fully skinned your bird, the recipe works with a meat-only breast—it just isn’t quite as crispy.

You can do this one indoors on the stovetop with a large enough pot, but I like to do it outside with my fish fryer. Add enough oil to the pot to fully cover the turkey when it is slowly lowered in. I use vegetable, peanut, or soy oil for any of my deep-frying needs. This is a time when you need a good thermometer. For best results, allow the oil to reach 350°F before adding the turkey.

Place the breast in the basket of your fish fryer or grip it with a large pair of tongs. Gently lower the meat into the 350°F oil. Fry for 6 to 8 minutes per pound or until the thickest part of the meat registers 150°F on a digital thermometer. Allow excess oil to drain from the meat. Move the turkey to a large cutting board and loosely tent with foil to rest for 5 to 10 minutes. Slice across the grain with a sharp knife for serving.

Serve the turkey up with your favorite vegetable, a nice salad, and a potato or pasta for a full and easy meal.

MIMOSA-MARINATED FRIED TURKEY BISCUITS

INGREDIENTS



1 wild turkey breast half, sliced, against the grain, into cutlets

1 cup orange juice

1 cup Prosecco or champagne

1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

1 cup fried chicken mix or seasoned flour

Oil for frying

Fresh hot biscuits

For your next weekend brunch, take direction from everyone’s favorite brunch drink, the mimosa. Slice a wild turkey breast, across the grain, into cutlets. Pound them with a meat mallet to tenderize.

Marinate them in 1 cup each of orange juice and either champagne or Prosecco with a tablespoon of Worcestershire sauce.

Use your favorite fried chicken coating for this one, or make your own by seasoning all-purpose flour.

Marinate the turkey, covered, in the refrigerator for at least 4 hours or up to overnight. When you are ready to cook, drain the marinade. Heat a half-inch of oil in a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Dredge the marinated turkey cutlets in the breading mixture.

Fry, in batches so that you don’t overcrowd the pan, for 3 to 4 minutes per side or until the turkey reaches 150°F in the center and is crispy and golden on the surface.

Break open a homemade biscuit and fill it with a crunchy fried turkey slice. Use the remaining orange juice and bubbly for mimosas while you enjoy a wild turkey brunch.

WILD TURKEY WITH MUSHROOMS AND BALSAMIC VINEGAR SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

1 pound wild turkey breast, cut into strips across the grain

Salt and pepper to taste

4 tablespoons all-purpose flour

3 tablespoons olive oil

6 cloves garlic, finely chopped

¾ pound fresh mushrooms, sliced

¾ cup chicken broth

½ cup balsamic vinegar

¼ teaspoon dried rosemary

¼ teaspoon dried thyme

1 bay leaf

Prepared noodles or rice

Season the sliced turkey with salt and pepper. Season the flour with salt and pepper and toss the turkey in the flour mixture.

Heat oil in a skillet over medium-high heat and sauté the turkey until it is nicely browned on one side (around 3 to 5 minutes). Flip the turkey pieces.

Reduce the heat to medium. Add the garlic and mushrooms. Cook for around 3 minutes, and then add the chicken broth, balsamic vinegar, rosemary, thyme, and bay leaf. Cover and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Move the turkey from the skillet to a warm platter, cover with foil, and set aside. Turn the heat back up to medium high and simmer the sauce, uncovered, to thicken (around 6 to 8 minutes).

Discard the bay leaf. Remove the pan from the heat, return the turkey to the skillet, and toss to coat with sauce. Serve over rice or noodles.

THANKSGIVING STUFFED WILD TURKEY ROLL

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast, butterflied and opened into a flat sheet

1½ teaspoons ground dried sage

1 teaspoon dried thyme

½ teaspoon dried marjoram

½ teaspoon dried rosemary

¼ teaspoon coarse ground black pepper

¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg

MUSHROOM STUFFING

6 tablespoons butter, divided

2 pounds assorted mushrooms, sliced

2 medium leeks (or 1 large leek), white portion, sliced and rinsed

1 tablespoon fresh sage, chopped

1 tablespoon fresh rosemary, chopped

1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped

1½ teaspoons salt

2 cups sourdough bread cubes

1 cup chicken broth

2 eggs, beaten

It’s always nice to serve wild turkey for a Thanksgiving meal. This year, try serving it rolled around a mushroom stuffing and grilled.

For the stuffing, we use a variety of mushrooms, whatever we can find in season or growing wild. You can fill in with standard grocery store button mushrooms if you wish, or use them entirely if that is what you have on hand. Sauté the mushrooms in 3 tablespoons of butter along with the leeks, sage, rosemary, parsley, and salt until they have released all their moisture before adding them to the dressing. The stuffing for this recipe has just enough sourdough bread cubes to bind it together, but the real stars of the show are the sautéed mushrooms.

Start by butterflying the turkey breast into a flat sheet. Bring your knife one-third of the way up the side and slice parallel to the cutting board nearly all the way through the breast. Open it like a book. Starting at the center of the cut, repeat the process through the thickest side of the breast and open again, like a trifold letter. Use a meat mallet to pound the breast flat. Mix the seasoning ingredients and sprinkle half onto the surface of the turkey breast.



In a large mixing bowl, add the sautéed mushroom mixture, bread cubes, and chicken broth and stir gently until the bread has soaked up most of the moisture. Pour in the beaten eggs and stir gently to combine. Melt the remaining butter and pour into the dressing. Mix well.

Pour the stuffing into a greased 9x13 pan and bake at 350°F for 15 minutes. It will continue to cook inside the turkey on the grill. When the stuffing is out of the oven, fluff it with a fork and spread it evenly over the butterflied turkey breast. Roll tightly and tie the turkey with butcher’s twine to hold its shape.

Set your grill at 350°F. Grill the turkey for 45 to 60 minutes, or until the thickest portion of the meat reaches 155°F to 160°F.

Rest the turkey for 10 to 15 minutes before slicing.



MUSHROOM AND SPINACH STUFFED GRILLED WILD TURKEY BREAST

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast

Salt and pepper to taste

Butcher’s twine

BASTE

4 tablespoons butter, melted

2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce

1 tablespoon honey

1 tablespoon soy sauce

STUFFING

3 tablespoons butter

1 tablespoon olive oil

6 ounces oyster mushrooms, sliced

2 shallots, diced

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 cups fresh spinach, chopped

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ cup white wine

¾ cup grated Parmesan

Start by making the stuffing portion of the dish. Add 3 tablespoons of butter and one of olive oil to a large skillet over medium heat. Once the butter starts to bubble, add the mushrooms and sauté until they begin to get tender. Add the shallots and garlic. Continue cooking for an additional minute or two before adding the spinach. Season with salt and pepper and add the white wine and grated Parmesan cheese. Stir well and continue cooking until the spinach has wilted. Remove from heat and allow to cool slightly.

While the stuffing cooks, butterfly your turkey breast to open it up like a book. Cover with plastic wrap to contain any splatter, and then pound it flat with a meat mallet.

Once the stuffing is cool enough to work with, spoon it evenly over the flattened turkey breast. Roll the turkey up tightly, containing the stuffing on

the inside. Use butcher’s twine to truss the roll into shape and to hold it together while it cooks.

Grill for 45 to 60 minutes, depending on thickness of the roll. Mix the basting ingredients and brush on every ten to fifteen minutes during the grilling process. Shoot for an internal temperature of 155°F to 160°F. The temperature will rise another 5 degrees or so as the meat rests.

After resting for 10 to 15 minutes, remove the butcher’s twine and slice the turkey into medallions for serving.

CAJUN TURKEY WITH FRIED BISCUITS AND CHILI HONEY

INGREDIENTS

1 side of a wild turkey breast, cut into bite-sized pieces

1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning or to taste

2 cups seasoned flour; I use Kentucky Kernel brand

Oil for deep-frying

1 can jumbo biscuits

½ cup granulated sugar blended with 1 tablespoon cinnamon

3 to 4 ounces of honey, warmed and blended with 1 teaspoon chili powder

Hot chicken and waffles seems to be on every menu across the country because people love that salty/sweet/spicy flavor combination. We make a version with spicy fried turkey strips served over fresh waffles and drizzled with honey or syrup.

You can get that same flavor combination at deer or turkey camp without the hassle of making homemade waffles by using deep-fried biscuit dough. Feel free to mix up your favorite homemade biscuit recipe for this step, but even canned biscuits from the store work well.

Season the turkey bites well with Cajun seasoning before tossing them in seasoned flour to give them an extra layer of flavor. Deep-fry until golden

brown and just cooked through. Set the turkey aside and loosely cover with foil to keep it warm.

Tear or cut the biscuits into bite-sized pieces. Fry the dough in the same oil you used for the turkey. When they turn golden brown and float, they are ready. Remove the biscuits with a wire spider or slotted spoon to allow excess oil to drain back into pan. As soon as the biscuits come out of the oil, lightly shake on a blend of sugar and cinnamon.

Drizzle over some honey or syrup just before serving. For extra flavor, heat the honey and stir in some chili powder before drizzling it over the fried turkey.

The Dark

While the breast meat gets all the attention, around half the meat on a wild turkey is dark meat—mainly the thighs and legs. Wild turkeys are never still. All that moving around makes for some serious muscle. Hot and fast doesn’t work for these pieces. Wild turkey dark meat needs long, slow cooking at lower temperatures until it breaks down. While tougher than breast meat, the legs and thighs of a wild turkey pack plenty of flavor. Here’s how to bring it out.



SLOW COOKER TURKEY AND DUMPLINGS

INGREDIENTS

Legs and thighs from a wild turkey, skinned

3 quarts chicken broth

1 tablespoon salt

2 teaspoons black pepper

2–3 bay leaves

DUMPLINGS

2 cups all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

1 teaspoon salt

½ cup vegetable shortening, butter, or lard

½ cup cold milk

A slow cooker full of chicken broth is the perfect way to make turkey legs and thighs fall-off-the-bone tender.

Since you'll have a slow cooker full of extremely flavorful broth left over from cooking the legs and thighs, why not use it to make a comfort food classic? Hello, wild turkey and dumplings.

Simply cook the meat in the chicken broth on low all day (or overnight) with two to three bay leaves and 2 to 3 teaspoons of salt. When you get home that evening, the meat will be tender and easily shredded from the bone and connective tendons and such that make up the legs and thighs.

Use a spoon to skim away any solids that have accumulated on the surface of the broth. While the meat is cooling enough to shred, mix up a batch of these easy dumplings.

Mix the flour, baking powder, and salt in a large bowl. Add the lard, shortening, or butter and use a fork to work it into the dough.

Once the fat is evenly distributed into the flour, add the milk. Use the fork and then your hands to work the dough until it forms a shaggy ball.

Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured work surface and roll to around a quarter-inch in thickness. Use a knife or a pizza cutter to slice the dough into dumpling-sized strips.

Return the meat to the slow cooker and turn it to high. Once the broth is nearly at a boil, add the dumplings, a few at a time, stirring occasionally as you go. Season with additional salt and pepper, if needed. Let the

dumplings cook for another 30 to 45 minutes or until the dumplings are cooked through and the broth has thickened.

WILD TURKEY LEG ITALIAN WEDDING SOUP

INGREDIENTS MEATBALLS

16 ounces ground turkey legs and thighs

8 ounces ground pork

1 large egg

½ cup Italian or panko breadcrumbs

½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

2 large garlic cloves, minced

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon black pepper

SOUP

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 large yellow onion, chopped

2 medium carrots, chopped

2 celery ribs, chopped

2 large garlic cloves, minced

8 cups chicken stock

¾ cup orzo pasta

Kosher salt and black pepper

3 cups spinach, chopped

Shaved Parmesan, for serving (optional)

If you have several wild turkey legs and thighs, try deboning them and running them through the meat grinder. The result is a very flavorful turkey burger perfect for the meatballs in Italian wedding soup.

I mix in roughly half as much ground pork to the turkey to add a little fat to the finished meatball and help it stick together during the cooking process.

First, bone out the legs and thighs and remove the tendons.

Next, run the boneless meat through your grinder.

In a large bowl, mix the ground wild turkey with the ground pork. Add the remaining meatball ingredients. Roll the mixture into small meatballs, around the size of large marbles. If it sticks to your skin, you can rub a little olive oil on your hands before rolling the meatballs.



In a large stockpot or Dutch oven, add 2 tablespoons of olive oil over medium heat. For extra flavor, brown the meatballs on all sides (in batches if needed to keep from overcrowding the pan). Set the meatballs aside.

Add the remaining tablespoon of olive oil to the pan. Add the onion, carrot, and celery. Sauté until the vegetables are slightly soft and the onions translucent. Add the garlic and cook for another minute or two.

Add the stock and bring to a simmer. Cook for 30 minutes. Return the meatballs to the pot and add the orzo.

Season with salt and pepper. Add the chopped spinach. Reduce the heat and simmer until the pasta is cooked through.

Top with Parmesan cheese at serving, if desired.



CREAMY HUNGARIAN TURKEY LEG AND MUSHROOM SOUP

INGREDIENTS

2 turkey leg and thigh combos, slow simmered until tender

6 tablespoons butter

1 large yellow onion, chopped

2 pounds fresh mushrooms of choice, sliced

4 cups chicken broth

1 cup white wine

2 teaspoons fresh dill, chopped

3 teaspoons chopped dried thyme

4 teaspoons paprika

4 tablespoons soy sauce

1 teaspoon each salt and black pepper

2 cups half-and-half

5 tablespoons flour

½ cup sour cream

Juice of one lemon

Fresh dill or parsley for garnish

Turkey hunting is tough. So, when you do fill a tag, do yourself a favor and use as much of that trophy bird as possible—that includes the legs and thighs, or roughly half the meat on your turkey. All too often, these portions get left behind in favor of the more tender breast meat.

Toughened by daily hard use, the legs and thighs of a wild turkey require a bit of extra prep time to turn out nice and tender. One of the best ways is a slow simmer in water seasoned with salt and pepper. Add the turkey, bring the pot to a boil, and then reduce to a simmer and cook for 2 to 3 hours (or until the turkey peels easily from the bone).

Once it’s tender and cooled a bit, pick the meat away from the bones and use it for recipes like this creamy Hungarian-style soup. While the dark

meat of a wild turkey is nowhere near as tender as the breast meat, you can’t beat the extra flavor.

Slow-simmer the turkey legs and thighs in water until they are fork tender. Remove from the pot and rest until cool enough to pick the meat free from the bones and tendons.

In a large Dutch oven, cook the onions and mushrooms in butter until soft (around 15 minutes). Add the chicken broth, wine, dill, thyme, paprika, soy sauce, salt, and pepper. Add the turkey meat.

Bring the mixture to a boil, and then reduce to a simmer and cook for about 10 minutes. In a small bowl, combine the half-and-half with the flour and whisk until smooth. Whisk the mixture into the soup and cook around 10 minutes. Reduce the heat and add the sour cream and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Garnish with fresh dill or parsley.

SLOW COOKER TURKEY LEG AND NOODLE SOUP

INGREDIENTS

4 cloves garlic, minced

3 carrots, peeled and sliced

3 stalks celery, diced

1 onion, diced

4 wild turkey legs or 2 leg-thigh combos

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

8 cups wild turkey or chicken stock

1-inch stalk of fresh ginger

1 teaspoon dried thyme

1 teaspoon dried rosemary

2 bay leaves

Pinch of red pepper flakes

Juice of 1 lemon

2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

8 ounces uncooked egg noodles

Recipes don’t get much easier than this one for the slow cooker. Start by dicing the vegetables.

Season the legs well with salt and pepper, and add all ingredients except for the lemon juice, parsley, and noodles to your slow cooker. Put on the lid, turn it on low, and leave it alone for 6 to 8 hours (or until the turkey legs are fall-off-the-bone tender).

Use a spoon to skim away any foam that collected on the surface during the cooking process. Once they are tender, gently remove the legs from the pot and allow them to cool enough to shred. Pick the meat from the bones.

Return the meat to the pot and discard the bones. Fish out the ginger root and bay leaves and discard. Add the lemon juice, parsley, and noodles, and then check the stock for seasoning. Add salt and pepper as needed. Turn the slow cooker to high and cook for an additional 30 minutes or until the noodles are done.



The Bits

We’ve talked about turkey breast, legs, and thighs, but even if you use each of those, you still haven’t consumed all the good stuff a wild turkey has to offer. Hearts, gizzards, and livers are all not only edible but also delicious. Here’s how.



TURKEY HEART YAKITORI

INGREDIENTS

4–10 turkey hearts

1 cup teriyaki sauce, divided

2 tablespoons sesame seeds, divided

1 tablespoon honey

1 tablespoon minced garlic

1 tablespoon freshly grated ginger

While delicious, the issue with turkey hearts is that they aren’t very large, and it takes a few of them to make this recipe. If you or your family doesn’t harvest four or five birds per year, get all of your turkey-hunting buddies to save theirs as well and freeze until you have enough. I like at least five hearts for this dish, but anywhere from 4 to 10 will work, depending on how many folks you are serving.

Start by trimming away fat, connective tissue, and the valves from around the top of the hearts. Slice the hearts in half, lengthwise, and rinse well under cold water. Place the cleaned heart halves in a zip-top bag and add a half cup of teriyaki sauce, half of the sesame seeds, and the remaining marinade ingredients. I like to use freshly grated ginger for this one for better flavor.

Marinate, refrigerated, for 2 to 4 hours. Remove the hearts from the marinade and place, lengthwise, on a wood or metal skewer.

Grill over high heat, basting often with additional teriyaki sauce, for 4 to 6 minutes per side.

Serve over rice to stretch the appetizer or make it a light meal. Top with remaining sesame seeds for garnish.

FRIED WILD TURKEY GIZZARDS WITH BACON, ONIONS, AND MUSHROOMS

INGREDIENTS

4–5 turkey gizzards, cleaned and cut into bite-sized pieces

6 slices thick-cut bacon, cut into 1-inch sections

2 cups Kentucky Kernel or other seasoned flour

1 large or 2 medium sweet yellow onions, chopped

Salt and pepper to taste

1 pound mushrooms, sliced

If you are a fan of chicken gizzards, you will enjoy wild turkey gizzards as well. This recipe combines crispy fried gizzards with bacon, onions, and mushrooms to make a meal.

As an added bonus, the gizzard (used by the turkey to grind food before it is digested) is full of small stones that make a nice little trophy from each bird you tag. Because a turkey pecks stones from the area he inhabits to fill his gizzard, the stones will vary in color and type depending on where you harvest the bird.

Don’t worry if you don’t have enough turkey tags to make a gizzard meal. Just ask your family and hunting buddies to save their gizzards for you. I use around four to five gizzards for this recipe. With the onions and

mushrooms, it’s enough to feed two to four people as a main course or five to seven as an appetizer.

To clean the gizzard, open it up, rinse the stones into a wire-mesh strainer, and then remove the tough inner liner. Rinse the meat well. Save the cleaned stones as a unique trophy. When you have your gizzards cleaned, cut them up into bite-sized chunks.

While you clean and prep the gizzards, slice up the bacon and get it started rendering in a large skillet. When the bacon is crisp, remove it from the pan, leaving the drippings behind.



Coat the gizzards in your favorite seasoned flour. For me, that is Kentucky Kernel brand. Or season all-purpose flour to your preferences.

Brown the gizzards on all sides in the bacon drippings. Don’t overcook; a few minutes per side until they are crispy and golden all the way around is plenty.

Remove the fried gizzards from the skillet and add the chopped onions. Cook until soft, and season lightly with salt and pepper.

When the onions begin to soften, add the sliced mushrooms. I went with shiitake for this batch because I like their meaty texture. Use whatever mushroom you like or what you forage from your area. As the mushrooms start to soften, check for seasoning, and season again with salt and pepper if needed. Remember that the gizzards and bacon are both slightly salty, so don’t go overboard.

When the mushrooms are soft and the onions have caramelized, return the gizzards and bacon to the pan. Stir gently to combine and distribute the gizzards throughout the onions and mushrooms. Serve hot.



TURKEY HEART–STUFFED JALAPEÑO PEPPERS

INGREDIENTS

3–4 wild turkey hearts, sliced vertically into halves (small hearts) or quarters (large hearts)

6–9 jalapeño peppers with tops, seeds, and veins removed

1 block cream cheese, room temperature

2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese

1 tablespoon dried chives

1 teaspoon dried oregano

1 teaspoon dried parsley

2 cloves garlic, minced

½ teaspoon black pepper

6–9 slices bacon

MARINADE

½ cup soy sauce

¼ cup Worcestershire sauce

¼ cup lime juice

2 tablespoons honey

Turkey hearts are a particular favorite around here. Tender, meaty, and delicious, they can be grilled, fried, or sautéed. For this recipe, we slice the hearts top to bottom, marinate them, and then stuff them into a hollowed-out jalapeño pepper. For added flavor, we pipe the pepper full of herbed cream cheese and wrap it with a slice of bacon before grilling.

Start by trimming any fat from the surface of the heart. Slice the hearts vertically (top to bottom) in half. If the hearts are too large for your peppers, slice again into quarters. Mix the marinade ingredients well in a bowl, and then add the hearts and refrigerate 8 hours or overnight.

Remove the tops from the peppers. Use a paring knife to remove the seeds and ribs from the inside of the pepper (wear gloves to keep the oil off your hands, if desired).

With either a stand or a hand mixer, blend the room-temperature cream cheese, Parmesan, dried herbs, minced garlic, and pepper. Blend well until the mixture is smooth. Spoon the mixture into a 1-gallon zip-top bag, squeeze out the air, and seal the bag.

Insert a piece of marinated turkey heart into a pepper. Use a pair of scissors to snip off a small corner of the bag. Squeeze the bag to pipe the seasoned cream cheese from the opening into the pepper, filling around the heart.

Wrap the bacon around the outside of the pepper, starting at the bottom and working your way up, overlapping the wraps to hold the bacon on the pepper. Secure the bacon at the top with a toothpick.

Place the peppers on your preheated grill at 350°F. Cook for 25 to 30 minutes or until bacon is cooked and peppers are soft.

Serve as an appetizer or a main course.

HOT-AND-SPICY GRILLED TURKEY HEARTS ON AVOCADO TOAST

INGREDIENTS

5 turkey hearts, halved and trimmed of connective tissue at top of heart

1 cup Hot and Spicy Kentuckyaki sauce

10 thin slices rustic Italian or French bread

10 slices from half an avocado

3 tablespoons Bourbon Barrel Foods Bluegrass Soy Sauce

3 tablespoons honey

Living in Kentucky, the heart of the world's best whiskey makers (take that, Scotland), has its benefits. The bourbon industry has spawned a number of spinoffs, including one of my favorites: Bourbon Barrel Foods. They make gourmet food products that are handcrafted in small batches in Louisville, Kentucky. Reclaimed barrels straight from Kentucky's finest bourbon distilleries are used as both a smoking and an aging agent. Their signature product, Bluegrass Soy Sauce, is the only microbrewed soy sauce made in the United States and the only soy sauce in the world fermented and aged in bourbon barrels.

For this recipe, we used that award-winning soy sauce along with another of their signature products: Hot and Spicy Kentuckyaki. Flavored with fresh

garlic and ginger and sweetened with pure-cane Kentucky sorghum, this version includes red pepper to give this sauce some heat.

It makes the perfect marinade for a part of the wild turkey that often gets left in the woods: the heart. Once we have several hearts saved, we'll use them for a recipe like this one.

You can do as many or as few as you have hearts. You'll get two appetizers from each heart.



Start by slicing the hearts in half and trimming any connective tissue away from the top of the heart halves. Place the halved hearts in a bowl and pour over the Hot and Spicy Kentuckyaki. Cover and refrigerate overnight to marinate.

When you're ready, preheat your grill to 350°F. Place five heart halves on a metal or bamboo skewer. Repeat until all hearts are skewered. Grill the hearts for 10 to 15 minutes.

While the hearts grill, toast 10 thin slices of Italian or French bread. Slice half an avocado into thin slices.

Mix the glaze by stirring the soy sauce into the honey with a fork.

To plate, lay a slice of avocado onto a slice of toasted bread. Place a heart half onto the avocado. Once all the toast slices are filled, drizzle over the honey/soy dressing before serving.

GARLIC LOVERS’ FRIED WILD TURKEY GIZZARDS

INGREDIENTS

Meat from 4–5 turkey gizzards, cleaned

1 tablespoon salt for soaking and rinsing gizzards

3 cups milk

20–25 garlic cloves, peeled and halved

3 tablespoons lard or oil for frying

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon onion powder

¾ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon sesame oil

½ teaspoon red pepper flakes (or to taste)

Korean chicken gizzards, or dak dong jib, are a popular appetizer intended to be consumed with a beer or other drinks before a main meal.

Don’t save your turkey gizzards? If you’ve ever enjoyed chicken gizzards, fried or otherwise, you probably should. They’re more like rich and flavorful dark meat from a chicken or a pheasant. I realize that not everyone gets to kill enough turkeys each year to make a gizzard meal, but ask your hunting buddies to save theirs. I bet you’ll have plenty in no time.

If you’re going to save and cook your turkey gizzards, you need to know a little about what they do and how to clean them. Turkeys, like all birds, don’t have teeth. That makes grinding up seeds and other foods they consume tough. Enter the gizzard—a small, muscular organ. Think of the gizzard as a grinder. Turkeys consume small stones that lodge inside the gizzard. When the bird eats, they swallow their food whole. That food first stops inside the gizzard, where strong muscles move the food around with the stones, grinding it into smaller pieces before it continues to their two-part stomach. The grinding action breaks down the hard seeds to the point that the stomach can extract the nutrients the turkey needs.

To clean the gizzard, open it up, remove the stones from the center, rinse well, remove the tough inner liner, and then rinse again. Once you have the gizzard cleaned and trimmed up, you are left with pure muscle, no different from the legs or thighs of the bird. Because it’s a muscle that sees near-constant use, the texture is a little chewy, but, just like chicken gizzards, that texture and flavor are what make people love them. For this recipe, trim and clean four to five gizzards.

Cut the meat up into smaller bite-sized bits. Rinse well in lightly salted water, a few times, until the water remains clear. Add the trimmed gizzards to a bowl and pour over the milk.


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The milk both tenderizes and flavors the gizzards. Set the bowl aside and allow them to marinate in the milk for a minimum of 30 minutes.

While the gizzards soak, it’s time to peel the garlic. Slice each clove in half lengthwise. Yes, this seems like a lot of garlic, but it works. Trust the process.

When you’re ready to cook, pour the milk off the gizzards and rinse with cold, salted water. Drain and then pat dry with paper towels. Add the lard (better flavor) or oil to a large skillet over medium-high heat. When the oil starts to shimmer and smoke, add the gizzards. Some liquid will cook out, but just keep cooking, stirring regularly, until the liquid evaporates and the gizzards start to brown. Season the gizzards with garlic powder, onion powder, and ¾ teaspoon of salt.

Add the garlic cloves. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the garlic softens and starts to char. Season with additional salt, black pepper, sesame oil, and red pepper flakes. If you don’t care for spicy food, you can eliminate the red pepper flakes and replace them with sweet paprika for flavor. Check for seasoning and add more salt and pepper, if needed.

Once the garlic has cooked through and the gizzards are done, serve as an appetizer with a cold drink of choice.


Turkey Stock
Turkey Stock

SLOW COOKER WILD TURKEY STOCK

INGREDIENTS

Breast, back, and wing bones from a wild turkey

2 carrots, cut into 2-inch sections

1 stalk celery, cut into 2-inch sections

1 large yellow onion, quartered

1 head of garlic, halved

2 bay leaves

Pint jars or freezer bags

A good stock is one of the most important tools you can have in the kitchen. Sure, you can buy a passable stock at the grocery, but the extra flavor you get from making your own is well worth it.

Break out your slow cooker. After cleaning our birds, we save the breast and back bones after the breast meat has been removed. We also save the drumstick section of the wings. Add the ingredients, cover with water, and turn the slow cooker to low. Let it do its thing for 12 to 24 hours, and you will end up with the most flavorful stock you have ever used.

Not only is it easy to make, but you also get the bonus of using even more of your trophy. If cloudy stock doesn’t bother you, go straight from slow cooker to storage container. If you prefer your stock to be nice and clear,

skim any debris from the top of the stock as it cooks and filter the finished product through cheesecloth.

To store your stock, use pint jars or zip-top freezer bags. You can store the jarred stock in the refrigerator for up to 3 weeks, freeze in bags for up to 5 months, or pressure-can the jars for years of shelf-stable storage.

Cut the carrots and celery into roughly 2-inch sections. Quarter the onion and slice the garlic head in half. Chop the back and breastbone into manageable sections to better fit the slow cooker.

Add the turkey bones and remaining ingredients to the slow cooker. Cover with cold water to the top of the slow cooker. Turn to low and cook for 12 to 24 hours, skimming the surface with a spoon from time to time, if desired.

Cool the finished stock. Strain it through a cheesecloth-lined mesh strainer over a bowl or pitcher. Pour the finished stock into freezer bags or pint jars.

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SMALL GAME

GROWING UP IN MY FAMILY, WHEN DISCUSSING HUNTING, most of the time, we were talking about small game. Deer seasons back then were still short and limits were conservative. Wild turkey populations were just getting started. When we went hunting, it was most often for rabbits or squirrels.

I came from a rabbit-hunting family. Some of my earliest memories were of my uncles, cousins, grandfather, and dad gathering in the driveway on weekend mornings, a pack of beagles excitedly running around our feet. Even before I was old enough to pack a gun, I tagged along, reveling in the race as the hounds chased plentiful rabbits in tight circles.

With an August start date, squirrels always signaled the start of hunting season. I would come home from school, grab a shotgun or .22, and hit the ridges around our farm. To this day I maintain there is no better teacher of woodsmanship than a squirrel. Learn to successfully hunt them, to read the woods to know what they are feeding on, to sneak up into gun range, and to make a successful shot on a regular basis, and you can hunt anything in the world.

Country-fried rabbit or squirrel was always a favorite, but that isn’t the only way to enjoy these game animals. Here are a few of our favorite recipes.



TENDER BRAISED BBQ SQUIRREL

INGREDIENTS

Squirrel, cleaned and quartered

Realtree APX Seasoning or your favorite

12 ounces beer or chicken stock

BBQ sauce

When we get together with friends for a big squirrel hunt, one of my favorite ways to cook and serve the morning's take is this combination grill/braise method. Squirrel has a reputation for being a tough and chewy critter, and grilling them directly over heat, while flavorful, doesn't do anything to prove that reputation wrong.

But this recipe starts with a direct grill for good smoke flavor and then finishes with a slow braise in liquid, either beer or chicken stock, along with a drizzle of your favorite BBQ sauce.

The result is a tender bite that is easy to eat and tastes great. If we have a lot of squirrels to choose from, I do pick out the younger ones for this recipe, saving the older, larger squirrels for the stew or dumpling pot. I also like to cook just the hindquarters for this one so that they all cook evenly, although the saddle section will work as well. Front legs can overcook if mixed in with the larger pieces, so save them for the fry skillet.

Start by seasoning the squirrel. I used Realtree APX brand all-purpose seasoning, but you can also use salt, pepper, and garlic powder or whatever BBQ rub you prefer.

Next, place the squirrel directly on the grill at about 300°F. Grill for 45 to 60 minutes.

Remove the squirrel from the grill and place it into a large aluminum roasting pan. Pour in one can of beer or 12 ounces of chicken stock. Drizzle over your favorite BBQ sauce so that each piece gets a little. Cover the pan tightly with foil.

Return the pan to the grill. Turn the temperature down to 250°F and slowly braise for another 60 to 90 minutes or until the squirrel is tender.

Serve these as a main course or as an appetizer like wings.

HAWAIIAN GRILLED SQUIRREL

INGREDIENTS

2–3 young squirrels, quartered

½ cup brown sugar

½ cup pineapple juice

½ cup soy sauce

½ cup water

7 ounces coconut milk

Green onions, chopped (save some for garnish)

1 teaspoon minced garlic

1 teaspoon sesame oil

3 cups cooked white rice

1 can sliced pineapple (use the juice in the marinade)

Additional soy or teriyaki sauce for drizzling to taste

Try marinating your squirrel overnight in a blend of Hawaiian-style flavors and then slowly grilling it for a nice smoky flavor. The pineapple juice in the marinade helps tenderize the meat.

We serve this dish over white rice and add some grilled pineapple slices for a bit of sweetness to complement the squirrel. Top with a bit of soy or teriyaki sauce and a sprinkle of sliced green onions before serving.

You want younger squirrels for this recipe. They marinate well and cook through quickly without drying out and getting tough.

Quarter the squirrels into leg and back pieces.

Mix the brown sugar, pineapple juice, soy sauce, water, coconut milk, green onions, garlic, and sesame oil together. Place the squirrel in a glass or plastic container or a gallon-sized zip-top bag. Pour over the marinade. Marinate the squirrel overnight.



Grill at a fairly low temperature, around 275°F to 300°F, for 10 to 15 minutes per side or until the squirrel is just cooked through. With about 10 minutes of grill time remaining, add the pineapple slices to the grill.

Grill the slices for 5 minutes per side. Serve the squirrel over rice and surround with grilled pineapple. Top with additional soy or teriyaki sauce

and additional sliced green onions.



CRISPY SESAME STICKY SQUIRREL WINGS

INGREDIENTS

8–12 squirrel front legs

Oil for pan-frying

1 teaspoon white pepper

1 cup cornstarch

1–2 tablespoons sesame seeds for garnish

SAUCE

½ cup soy sauce

¼ cup mirin

¼ cup rice wine

¼ cup sugar

1 clove garlic, minced

1 teaspoon Chinese five-spice powder

When we clean our squirrels, we often package the front legs separately from the backs and hindquarters. The latter get fried, smoked, and added to soups, stews, burgoos, and dumplings. The former get cooked up in a variety of ways and served as appetizers. We call them squirrel wings since they sort of resemble a chicken wing when cooked and share a similar easy-to-grip bone handle, making them the perfect party snack food.

This recipe is a quick-and-easy stovetop version that turns out sweet, savory, crisp squirrel legs perfect for serving up at your next get-together. If you happen to take a few young gray squirrels, you can use the hindquarters for this dish as well.

Heat a half-inch of vegetable oil in a skillet over medium heat. Season the legs with white pepper, and then coat them with cornstarch.

Fry the legs 5 to 6 minutes per side or until just cooked through and brown and crispy on the surface. Fry in batches to prevent overcrowding the pan.

While the squirrel cooks, in a separate pan, add the soy sauce, mirin, rice wine, sugar, garlic, and five-spice powder. Stir to combine and bring to a boil.

Reduce the heat and simmer until the sauce thickens. Add the fried legs to the saucepan and toss to coat evenly.

Sprinkle on the sesame seeds and serve immediately.


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TIMBER 2 TABLE

CAJUN SQUIRREL DIRTY RICE

INGREDIENTS

Boned meat from two squirrels

Hearts and livers from two squirrels

1 yellow onion, diced

1 bell pepper, diced

1 stalk celery, chopped

1 clove garlic, minced

1½ cups of long grain and wild rice blend

4 cups chicken stock

2 cups water

2 tablespoons Cajun seasoning

1 teaspoon ground thyme

2 bay leaves

Dirty rice is one of my favorite side dishes. The earthy flavor of the traditional chicken livers ties in nicely with the spicy Cajun seasoning blend.

The recipe is great with just about any meat, but one of the best is squirrel. Since you precook the squirrel until tender and then debone it, this is a great way to use up older squirrels that might be a little too tough to fry. You can simmer the squirrel all day in the slow cooker, or do like we did and cook it

in the Instant Pot or similar pressure cooker. The pressure cooker method cuts the cooking time from all day to under a half-hour.

You can make the recipe with just the squirrel meat and a couple of diced chicken livers, or you can really ratchet up the flavor by saving your squirrel hearts and livers for the dish.

Cook the squirrel (not the hearts and livers) in either a slow cooker for 5 to 7 hours or an Instant Pot for 25 minutes. Allow it to cool and strip the meat from the bones.

Dice the raw hearts and livers, and then set them aside. Give the onion, peppers, and celery a rough chop.

In a large heavy pot over medium-high heat, sauté the onion, green pepper, and celery for 7 to 10 minutes or until the onions are soft and cooked through. Add the garlic and diced hearts and livers. Cook for another 3 to 5 minutes.

Add the rice, stock, boned-out squirrel meat, and water. Add the Cajun seasoning and thyme. Stir well. Toss in the bay leaves.

Bring the mixture to a low boil, and then reduce the heat and simmer, covered, for 25 to 30 minutes until the rice is done. Fluff with fork before serving.

SQUIRREL COUNTRY CAPTAIN

INGREDIENTS

8 ounces bacon, diced

2 large or 3 small squirrels, dressed and quartered, seasoned with salt and pepper and dredged in seasoned flour

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 cups diced yellow onion

2 cups diced celery

2 cups diced green bell pepper

1 fresh hot chili pepper, seeded and minced

Salt and pepper

2 tablespoons curry powder

1 teaspoon chopped garlic

2 bay leaves

15-ounce can of chopped tomatoes, with juice

2 cups chicken stock

3 cups cooked white rice

Serve with diced scallions, chopped roasted peanuts, seedless raisins, sweet onion relish, chutney, crisp bacon, pickled hot peppers

My version of this classic Low Country dish uses squirrel in place of the chicken. The flavor of the squirrel fits the dish perfectly, but since the squirrel meat is a bit tougher and leaner than chicken, it benefits greatly from some additional fat and cooking time.

The fat was easy; it comes in the form of diced bacon, which also adds a layer of smoky flavor to the finished dish. The extra cooking time takes place in the oven, making a cast-iron Dutch oven the perfect vessel for the dish. Start the dish on the stove top, and then simply cover and move to the oven to finish the cooking process. Since the cooking time is increased, I added a bit more chicken stock than the standard recipe calls for.

The original recipe calls for skin-on chicken, which isn't really an option with squirrel. I compensated by dusting the squirrel in seasoned flour before browning it in the bacon grease. The flour also helps thicken the final dish.

Traditionally, the dish is to be served over rice with a variety of condiments. We tried diced scallions, chopped and roasted peanuts, raisins, sweet onion relish, bacon, and chili peppers for a blend of sweetness, spice, and salty flavor.



Render the bacon in the Dutch oven until it is crisp. Remove bacon from pot and reserve. Brown the squirrel pieces in the bacon grease, in batches, until all the pieces are browned on both sides. Remove from pan and reserve on a warm plate. Don’t worry about cooking the squirrel completely; just get it nice and brown all over.

Add the butter to the Dutch oven and add the onions, celery, and green peppers. Season well with salt and pepper. Cook for 10 minutes, and then add the curry powder. Continue cooking, stirring frequently for five more minutes or until the vegetables begin to soften and the onions become opaque.

Add the garlic, bay leaves, and canned tomatoes. Pour in the chicken stock and return the squirrel to the pan, nestling it down into the tomato/vegetable mixture. Place the Dutch oven into a preheated 300°F oven and cook for 90 minutes. Serve over white rice and top with condiments of everyone’s choosing.



CENTRAL AMERICAN–STYLE FRIED RABBIT

INGREDIENTS

2–3 rabbits, quartered

Vegetable oil or lard for frying

BRINE

5 cups water

½ cup kosher salt

2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper

2 teaspoons red chili flakes

DREDGE

2 cups all-purpose flour

1½ tablespoons Lawry’s Seasoning Salt

1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper

1 tablespoon ground white pepper

1 teaspoon curry powder

2 teaspoons ground cumin

¾ teaspoon cayenne

1½ teaspoons paprika

1½ teaspoons Accent Flavor Enhancer

This Guatemalan-style recipe starts with a salty brine seasoned with black pepper and chili flakes. From there, the rabbit gets dredged in a flour mixture with curry, cumin, and cayenne, and then it is fried until crispy.

We use a touch of Accent Flavor Enhancer, which contains monosodium glutamate (MSG), to perk up the flavor of the dredge, but it’s still pretty good without it if you want to leave it out.

Mix the brine ingredients in a large bowl. Add the quartered rabbit. Brine, refrigerated, 4 to 8 hours.

Remove the rabbit from the brine, rinse, and pat dry. Mix the dredge ingredients.

Toss the rabbit pieces well in the seasoned dredge and move to a wire rack to rest.

Heat a half-inch of vegetable oil or lard in a cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Once the fat is near 350°F, add the rabbit, a few pieces at a time. Fry, turning occasionally, for 10 to 15 minutes or until the crust is golden brown and the rabbit is just cooked through. Move the cooked rabbit to a wire rack to drain while you continue cooking remaining pieces.

PARMESAN-CRUSTED RABBIT

INGREDIENTS

3 rabbits, separated into leg and back sections

2 cups buttermilk mixed with 4 tablespoons hot sauce

1 cup Italian breadcrumbs

1 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese (save a bit and grate in small shreds for garnish)

1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped

1 teaspoon dried thyme

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon paprika

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon pepper

Nonstick cooking spray

Separate each rabbit into five pieces: front legs, rear legs, and a back section. Blend the hot sauce into the buttermilk. Marinate the rabbit, refrigerated, at least 4 hours and up to 8.

Combine breadcrumbs, Parmesan, parsley, thyme, garlic powder, paprika, salt, and pepper.Remove the rabbit from the buttermilk, one piece at a time, allowing the excess buttermilk to drain for a few seconds. Roll the rabbit in

the breadcrumb and Parmesan mixture and place on a foil-lined, lightly greased half-sheet baking pan.

Place in the oven and bake for 50 to 60 minutes, turning once 30 minutes into the cooking process.



COCA-COLA-BRINED FRIED RABBIT

INGREDIENTS

2–3 rabbits, quartered into leg and back sections

BRINE

5 cups Coca-Cola (the Mexican version made with real sugar, if possible)

10 sprigs fresh thyme

4 cloves garlic, minced

2 tablespoons Crystal hot sauce

1 tablespoon salt

SPICE RUB

3 teaspoons salt

2 teaspoons smoked paprika

1½ teaspoons ground dried sage

1 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon onion powder

½ teaspoon dried rosemary

BATTER

2 cups all-purpose flour

3 teaspoons baking soda

4 teaspoons salt

2 teaspoons black pepper

2 teaspoons cayenne pepper

1½ teaspoons garlic powder

1½ teaspoons onion powder

3¼ cups water

¾ cup peanut oil

FRYING

8 cups peanut oil

2 cups lard

I based this recipe for fried rabbit directly on Oxford, Mississippi's famed City Grocery recipe, and it's become one of my favorite ways to eat rabbit. For the marinade, I hit the local Mexican grocery for Mexican-style Coca-Cola, made with cane sugar instead of the more common corn syrup we find here in the States. I think it makes a difference, but the recipe is still outstanding with any normal non-diet cola.

Start by mixing the brine ingredients. Add the rabbit and refrigerate for 4 to 6 hours.

Blend the ingredients for the spice rub.



Heat 8 cups of peanut oil and 2 cups of lard in a large Dutch oven or heavy cast-iron chicken fryer pan.

Drain the marinade from the rabbit and pat the sections dry with paper towels.

Rub the spice mixture onto the rabbit, using your fingers to work it into the surface of the meat.

Blend the batter ingredients in a large bowl. Once your oil reaches 350°F, dip the rabbit, one piece at a time, into the batter mixture. Lift the rabbit from the batter and allow the excess to drip back into the bowl. If doing three rabbits, you might need to double the batter recipe.

Gently drop the dipped rabbit pieces one at a time into the hot oil. Fry in batches to prevent overcrowding the pan. Fry for 3 to 4 minutes, and then use tongs to turn each piece of rabbit to prevent it from overbrowning on one side. Continue frying for another 4 to 6 minutes. Front legs might take a little less time than back and hind leg sections.



CHAR SIU RABBIT

INGREDIENTS

2–3 rabbits, deboned and cut into large bites

½ cup soy sauce

½ cup honey

⅓ cup ketchup

¼ cup brown sugar

¼ cup Chinese rice wine

2 tablespoons hoisin sauce

1 tablespoon red food coloring (optional)

1 teaspoon Chinese five-spice powder

1 teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon garlic powder

You have probably tried the sticky, sweet, brilliantly red Chinese-style barbecued pork at a restaurant or two. Even if you haven't tried it, I'll bet the bright-red color at least caught your eye.

This version substitutes boned-out rabbit meat for the pork. Marinate it at least 8 hours (or overnight) and then grill for some of the most flavorful, juiciest rabbit you will ever taste. We like to serve it with stir-fried vegetables and steamed white rice for a full meal.

The traditional bright-red color comes, of course, from the red food coloring. Leaving it out will have no bearing on the finished flavor of the char siu at all, so feel free to omit that ingredient if you avoid artificial food coloring.

Debone the rabbit by separating the carcass into the traditional legs and back. Push the bones of the rear leg through the meat and twist to remove. Fillet out the backstraps, just like you would on a deer. Since a rabbit's front leg doesn't have a ton of meat on it to begin with, I usually leave them bone-in for this recipe—cook's treat.

Blend all ingredients except the rabbit into a marinade. Place the rabbit in a glass dish or plastic bag and pour over the marinade. Marinate, refrigerated, for 8 to 24 hours.

Heat your pellet, charcoal, or gas grill to medium-high, around 300°F. Pull the rabbit pieces from the marinade, letting any excess liquid drip back into the bag/dish. If the grates on your grill are spaced far enough apart to allow the rabbit to fall through, add a grill pan.

Grill the rabbit for 30 minutes or until the rabbit is just cooked through. Serve over rice alongside stir-fried vegetables for a complete meal.

BOURBON BUTTERMILK FRIED RABBIT

INGREDIENTS

2 rabbits, dressed and quartered

1 cup bourbon

1 quart buttermilk (get whole milk if you can find it)

Shortening, lard, or peanut oil

FLOUR COATING

2 cups all-purpose flour

1½ tablespoons paprika

1 tablespoon salt

1 tablespoon white pepper

2 teaspoons garlic salt

1 teaspoon dried mustard

1 teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon dried thyme

½ teaspoon dried basil

½ teaspoon dried oregano

½ teaspoon ground ginger

Buttermilk, bourbon, and fried rabbit—all good things by themselves. Put them together, and they are outstanding. We marinate the quartered rabbit overnight in a mixture of whole-milk buttermilk and bourbon and then coat in a seasoned-flour recipe that is somewhat reminiscent of the fried chicken made famous by a white-suited gentleman from Kentucky (even though this one only has 10 herbs and spices).

Whisk the bourbon into the buttermilk. Pour the mixture over the quartered rabbit and refrigerate for 8 to 10 hours. Make sure all the rabbit is in contact with the liquid.

Mix herbs and spices into the flour. Remove the rabbit from the marinade, leaving it wet with buttermilk, and dredge in the flour mixture. Place the dredged rabbit on a wire rack for 10 minutes to allow the crust to set.

Heat an iron skillet with shortening, lard, or peanut oil over medium-high heat until the oil reaches 350°F.

Fry the rabbit for 10 to 15 minutes per side. Move to a paper-lined platter while you finish frying the rest of the rabbit.



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WATERFOWL

WATERFOWL—BOTH DUCKS AND GEESE—sometimes get a bad rap when it comes to table fare. To be fair, they do vary greatly from species to species, and even in the same species, according to location and diet. Give me a cornfed midwestern mallard or a wood duck that has been gorging on acorns, and I'll put it up against any game meat on the planet. Offer up a diving duck that mostly eats crustaceans it digs up off the muddy bottom of a lake or ocean, and you have to take a little more care to coax the best flavor from it.

This chapter covers the ducks and geese we hunt most regularly: puddle ducks and Canada geese for most of the season, and then snows and blues and the occasional speckle belly later on.



SPICY BUTTERMILK-FRIED GOOSE BREAST SANDWICH

INGREDIENTS

6–8 goose breasts

Oil for frying

MARINADE

1 cup buttermilk

½ cup Crystal Hot Sauce (or your favorite)

DREDGE

2 cups all-purpose flour

¼ cup Cajun seasoning

¼ cup buttermilk powder

When it comes to wild game, goose meat doesn't have the greatest reputation. The low ranking isn't entirely undeserved. Goose breast is high in iron and can be on the strong side when it comes to flavor. It can also be as tough as an old boot.

This recipe combats both of these issues. First, the breast meat gets pounded tender with a meat mallet and then marinated overnight. After that, it undergoes the ultimate flavor builder—dredging in seasoned flour and pan-frying.

I usually use skinless breast fillets for this one, but skin on will work as well. After frying, we serve them on a bun and top with a few pickles and anything else you enjoy on your sandwich. A bit of creamy ranch dressing is particularly good on these.

Start by pounding both sides of the goose breasts with the rough side of a meat mallet to break up the fibers in the meat and tenderize the goose. Mix the marinade ingredients and refrigerate 6 to 10 hours.

Mix the dredge ingredients.

Remove the goose from the marinade, allowing excess to drain so that the meat has a thin coating of marinade to help the dredge stick. Dredge both sides of the goose breast.

Heat a half-inch of oil in a cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Fry the goose 4 to 6 minutes per side until medium rare to medium. Don't

overcook.

Serve as a sandwich topped with ranch dressing, pickles, and whatever else you enjoy.

PAN-SEARED DUCK BREAST WITH BLACK-BERRY WINE SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

6–8 duck breasts, skin on

Salt and pepper

2–3 tablespoons duck fat, clarified butter, or oil

SAUCE

2 shallots, thinly sliced

2 cups sweet blackberry wine

1 cup chicken or duck stock

4–6 sprigs fresh thyme

1 sprig fresh rosemary

1 tablespoon butter

8 ounces fresh blackberries

Elevate a simple pan-seared duck breast into something special by topping it with this sauce made from blackberry wine.

Pick your favorite wine, but choose one on the sweet side for the most flavor. If you don’t have a sweet blackberry on hand, simply add a spoonful

of honey to the sauce as it cooks.

Duck fat is my preferred cooking medium for pan-seared waterfowl breasts, but clarified butter or even vegetable oil will work. We serve the breasts over a mix of long grain and wild rice and spoon the sauce over just before serving.

Start by seasoning the duck breasts on both sides with salt and pepper. Set aside. Start the sauce by adding the butter to a saucepan over medium heat. Add the thinly sliced shallots.

Sauté for 7 to 10 minutes or until the shallots are soft and translucent. Add the remaining sauce ingredients—except for the fresh blackberries. Raise the heat to medium-high. Bring the mixture to a boil; then reduce the heat and maintain a light boil. Cook for 20 to 30 minutes or until the sauce has reduced by half to two-thirds and what remains has a syrup-like consistency.



When the sauce has nearly finished reducing, add the duck fat to a heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Once the oil starts to smoke slightly, add the duck breasts, skin side down. Cook for 4 to 6 minutes without moving until the duck releases from the skillet and the skin is crisp. Flip the duck to cook for 3 to 5 minutes on the opposite side, taking care not to overcook. Move the cooked breasts to a warm platter and loosely tent with foil.

Pour the sauce through a mesh strainer to remove the herbs and cooked shallot. Add the fresh blackberries to the sauce and stir to combine.

Serve the duck over a bed of rice; then spoon over the sauce before serving.



HONEY GARLIC GRILLED DUCK BREAST

INGREDIENTS

6–8 duck or goose breasts, skin on

1½ teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon garlic powder

½ teaspoon dried rosemary

GLAZE

2 tablespoons butter

6 cloves garlic, finely minced

½ cup honey

2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

3 tablespoons soy sauce

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional)

This simple grilled duck recipe is big on flavor.

Make the glaze beforehand on the stove top, and then brush it on as the waterfowl cooks. Duck breasts, especially small ducks like teal or woodies,

only take a few minutes per side to cook, so have the glaze ready to go when you put them on the grill.

To make the glaze, simply melt the butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Once the butter starts to bubble, add the garlic. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes. Add the honey, apple cider vinegar, and soy sauce. Bring the mixture to a boil; then reduce heat to simmer. Add the red pepper flakes and simmer until the glaze thickens just a bit, around 3 to 4 additional minutes.

Season the waterfowl well on both sides.

Place the breasts, skin side down, on the grill at 350°F. Brush the meat side with the glaze. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes. Flip, and then brush on another layer of glaze. Grill for an additional 3 to 4 minutes. Glaze once more. Grill the waterfowl until the thickest portion reaches 125°F to 130°F for medium rare. Rest before slicing. Serve over rice.

FROZEN ORANGE JUICE DUCK STIR-FRY

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds duck breast, cut into slices and marinated in a blend of ½ cup soy sauce and 2 tablespoons cornstarch, whisked together

3 packs ramen noodles, cooked (don’t add flavor packets; you just need the plain noodles) and drained

2 tablespoons cooking oil

2 pounds assorted frozen or fresh vegetables like broccoli, green beans, carrots, peppers, and onions

⅓ cup frozen orange juice concentrate

SAUCE

½ cup soy sauce

¼ cup hoisin sauce

¼ cup rice wine vinegar

1 rounded tablespoon garlic chili crisps

1 tablespoon honey

1 tablespoon sesame oil

Nothing complements the flavor of duck breast as well as citrus and Asian-style spices and seasonings. This recipe uses frozen orange juice concentrate to add the citrus flavor to a quick and easy stir-fry. I like to do this one outdoors at duck camp on my Firedisc Cooker.

You can save time by using frozen vegetables versus cleaning and chopping fresh, but either option works well. Use any type of duck or goose breast you have on hand.

Add flavor and tenderize the meat with a process called velveting. Simply whisk a few tablespoons of cornstarch into half a cup of soy sauce. Pour the mixture over the sliced duck breast and stir to coat the meat well. Refrigerate the mixture for about an hour before you are ready to cook. The cornstarch softens the meat, the soy adds flavor, and the mixture thickens the sauce as the stir-fry cooks.

As with all waterfowl recipes, the most important step is to NOT overcook the waterfowl. Rare to medium rare is perfect. Stir-fry the meat over the center hot section of the cooker until it is just browned. Then push it up to the cooler edge while you cook the vegetables.

Have all of the ingredients prepped and measured before starting to cook. Stir-fries move quickly, and there won’t be time to run all over the kitchen looking for ingredients.



Cut the duck breasts into thin strips. Mix 2 tablespoons cornstarch into ½ cup soy sauce. Pour the mixture over the sliced duck breast and refrigerate for 1 to 2 hours. Mix the sauce ingredients and set aside. Cook the ramen and drain.

Heat your wok or Firedisc Cooker on high. Add two tablespoons oil to the hot cooker. Add the duck and marinade to the cooker. Stir-fry for 3 to 5 minutes or until the duck breast has evenly browned on all sides. Move the duck to the side of the pan to hold warm.

Stir-fry the vegetables over the center hot part of the pan. Once they are cooked through but still crisp, return the duck breast to the center. Add the frozen orange juice concentrate and sauce. Stir well to coat the meat and vegetables, and continue cooking until the sauce thickens.

Add the cooked ramen noodles and toss to blend and coat evenly with sauce. Serve immediately.



DR PEPPER AND SOY MARINATED DUCK BREAST

INGREDIENTS

4–6 boneless duck breast halves

Salt and pepper to taste

MARINADE

2 cups original Dr Pepper

1 cup soy sauce

½ cup hot sauce

¼ cup brown sugar or honey

3 cloves garlic, minced

3 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce

2 tablespoons lime juice

1 teaspoon freshly grated ginger

One of my favorite ways to prepare duck breast is with a simple marinade and a few minutes on a hot grill. This combination of Dr Pepper, soy sauce, and other flavors lends an Asian flair to the finished duck. We love to serve it with rice and grilled or stir-fried vegetables for a complete meal the entire family loves.

Start by mixing the marinade ingredients. Place the duck in the marinade and refrigerate for up to 8 hours.

Heat a charcoal or pellet grill to 350°F. Season the marinaded duck with salt and pepper to taste. Grill the duck for 5 to 7 minutes per side, or until the center reaches medium rare, or around 130°F on an instant-read thermometer. Don’t overcook the duck. Allow the duck breasts to rest off the grill for at least 5 minutes, and then slice across the grain for serving.

Serve over rice and with grilled or stir-fried vegetables. Offer additional soy or teriyaki sauce at the table.

PAN-SEARED MALLARD BREAST WITH BOURBON PLUM SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons peanut or grapeseed oil

2 teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon garlic powder

½ teaspoon paprika

½ teaspoon rosemary

6 mallard or other large duck breast halves, skin on

BOURBON PLUM SAUCE

2 tablespoons butter

1 shallot, diced

1 cup plum jam (I used damson plum)

2 tablespoons bourbon

1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar

½ teaspoon fresh grated ginger

½ teaspoon dried rosemary

¼ teaspoon garlic powder

Skin-on duck breasts are the perfect choice when you need a quick meal because they cook fast and taste great, particularly when topped with this

simple sauce made with plum jam and bourbon.

We serve the breast over rice and with a nice salad and some bread for a restaurant-quality meal that can be whipped up in minutes.

Start by heating a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Add the peanut or grapeseed oil to the pan and swirl to coat. Mix the salt, black pepper, garlic powder, paprika, and rosemary. Sprinkle it evenly over both sides of the duck.

Sear the duck, skin side down first, for 3 to 5 minutes. Flip the breasts and sear the opposite side for a similar time or until it reaches desired doneness. Move the duck to a warm plate and loosely tent with foil.

Reduce the heat to medium. Add the butter and diced shallot to the pan. Sauté for 5 to 7 minutes or until the shallot is soft and translucent.

Add the plum jam, bourbon, apple cider vinegar, grated ginger, rosemary, and garlic powder. Bring the mixture to a boil and cook for 3 to 4 minutes to allow the alcohol to evaporate and the sauce to thicken. If you don’t want to use bourbon in the recipe, substitute 2 tablespoons of apple cider vinegar and 1 tablespoon of water.

Return the duck breasts to the pan and spoon over the sauce to coat. Serve with rice and sides of choice.

MALLARD DUCK YAKISOBA

INGREDIENTS

Meat from 1–2 mallards or other ducks, legs, thighs, and breasts

3–4 blocks of ramen noodles, softened

¼ cup peanut oil

1 12-ounce bag frozen stir-fry vegetables

1 16-ounce bag of coleslaw mix or 16 ounces of raw cabbage, shredded

8 ounces sliced mushrooms

8 ounces sliced water chestnuts

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 tablespoon oyster sauce

½ cup yakisoba sauce

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon minced ginger

Pickled shredded ginger or toasted sesame seeds for garnish, if desired



Yakisoba is one of the popular street foods in Japan. What is yakisoba? It is stir-fried meat with shredded cabbage and other vegetables tossed with ramen noodles. Yakisoba sauce can be found in most large supermarkets and Asian groceries or ordered online. It tastes like a blend of Worcestershire and soy, with just a hint of sweetness. You can make your own by blending 4 tablespoons soy sauce, 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce, 2 tablespoons oyster sauce, 1 tablespoon rice vinegar, 1 tablespoon tomato sauce, 2 teaspoons sugar, 1 teaspoon hoisin sauce, and ½ teaspoon minced ginger.

Use fresh vegetables if you have time, such as snap peas, mushrooms, peppers, onions, and cabbage. In a hurry? Pick up a pack of frozen stir-fry vegetables and a pack of coleslaw base shredded cabbage at the market.

I cook this one in a Lodge cast-iron wok. We often stir-fry outdoors over a gas burner, so we don’t worry about smoking up the kitchen with the high heat necessary to properly stir-fry.

For this recipe, we use the leg, thigh, and breast meat from mallard ducks, diced into bitesized pieces. Stir-fry fast and hot in peanut oil to keep it tender.

The traditional noodle choice for yakisoba is ramen, so use three to four blocks of traditional ramen (the kind you lived off of in college) minus the flavoring pack. Pour boiling water over the ramen to soften the noodles before stir-frying them for a nice roasted flavor. Prepare your noodles before starting the stir-fry to save time.

Start the cook by heating the oil in the wok until it barely starts to smoke. Stir-fry the duck, hot and fast, just until it has good color. Don’t overcook. Move the duck to the outer (cooler) edges of the wok, and stir-fry the vegetables, coleslaw mixture, mushrooms, and water chestnuts for 2 to 3 minutes (or until the vegetables and mushrooms have just started to soften).

Return the duck to the vegetable mixture and pour over the soy, oyster, and yakisoba sauces before adding the garlic and ginger. Stir fry everything together another minute or two until the sauce thickens. Add the noodles and stir to mix. Serve with pickled ginger and/or sesame seeds for garnish.

DUCK BREAST AND BLACKBERRY STIR-FRY

INGREDIENTS

½ cup peanut or canola oil

2 duck breasts, skin on or skinned, cut into thin slices

2 cups snap peas

2 cups broccoli

2 bell peppers, julienned

1 cup mushrooms

1 can each of water chestnuts and bamboo shoots

1 pound fresh berries (use whatever is local or looks good at the market)

½ cup soy sauce

2 teaspoons Chinese five-spice powder

1 teaspoon fish sauce



There is something about duck and berries that just seems to work. A simple stir-fry is the perfect way to combine the two for a quick dinner. Use your favorite stir-fry ingredients; I went with julienned bell pepper, shiitake mushrooms, snap peas, broccoli, water chestnuts, and bamboo shoots for crunch, and then I finished it with blackberries for a touch of sweetness. This dish is a great way to stretch out a little duck to feed a lot of people.

Heat the peanut oil in a wok over high heat until it just starts to smoke. Add the duck breast slices and stir-fry for 2 to 3 minutes (or until just browned on the surface). Remove the meat to a warm bowl. Remove all but 2 tablespoons of remaining oil from wok. Add the vegetables and stir-fry for 5 to 7 minutes (or until the vegetables are cooked through but still crisp). Return the duck to the wok and add the soy sauce, five-spice powder, and fish sauce. Stir to blend. Add the fruit. Stir gently for 2 more minutes. Serve over rice or mix in softened rice noodles.

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UPLAND GAME

THERE ARE FEW EXPERIENCES IN THE OUTDOORS that rival watching a well-bred and trained bird dog work through the cover. The slightest molecule of scent causes them to quiver with excitement. If you have ever had that experience, then you probably get to enjoy another outstanding experience: cooking and eating upland game.

DOVE KEBABS

INGREDIENTS

Boneless breast meat fillets from 12–15 doves

2 bell peppers, cut into roughly 1½-inch squares

2 white or yellow onions, cut about the same size as the peppers

2 cups of pineapple, cut into roughly 1-inch cubes or a bit larger

MARINADE

1 cup pineapple juice

½ cup soy sauce

¼ cup honey

¼ cup ketchup

1 tablespoon rice vinegar

2 teaspoons sesame oil

2 large garlic cloves, minced

1 teaspoon grated fresh ginger

This dove recipe is always a hit, both for family and for dinner guests. The dove breasts get marinated in a sweet-and-salty mix of pineapple juice, soy sauce, and other seasonings and then threaded onto wood or metal skewers with whatever you'd like to add. We chose bell peppers, onions, and pineapple chunks.

Grill until the dove is medium rare to medium. Overcooking can cause the meat to be chewy and take on a liver-y flavor. Once the peppers and onions are soft, the dove is probably done. I usually grill these at around 350°F for 10 to 15 minutes.

Cut the peppers and onions into roughly 1-inch to 1½-inch pieces. Fresh pineapple tastes better than canned, and you have more control over the size of the chunks. Just core it and cut it to size. Place the boneless dove breast fillets, bell pepper, and onion in a 1-gallon ziptop bag.



Mix the marinade ingredients and stir well to combine. Pour the marinade into the bag and seal. Use your hands to gently work the bag around to make sure everything comes into contact with the marinade. Refrigerate for 30 minutes to 1 hour. Don’t over marinate, or the acid in the pineapple juice will start to “cook” the dove breast, leaving it with a mushy texture.

Pour off the marinade and assemble everything onto wooden or metal skewers. Alternate meat, pepper, onion, and the unmarinated pineapple chunks. Once all ingredients are on skewers, grill for 10 to 15 minutes, turning every few minutes to cook everything evenly.

I like to serve these kebabs over white rice for a full meal with very few dishes to clean up afterward.



EASY CAMPFIRE PHEASANT AND DUMPLINGS

INGREDIENTS

2–3 pounds boneless, skinless pheasant breasts

1 stick butter, melted

Cavender’s Greek seasoning

Salt and pepper

2 quarts water

2 tablespoons powdered chicken base

2 cans jumbo biscuits

1 cup Kentucky Kernel seasoned flour (or your favorite seasoned flour mixture)

Sometimes it is hard to make homemade dumplings in a camp setting. Canned biscuits substitute well in a pinch.

Start by deboning the pheasant breasts. Add the pheasant to the pot with the melted butter and season with salt and pepper. Cook for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the pheasant has browned lightly on all surfaces. Add 2 quarts water, and cook until the water is just below a boil. Add 2 tablespoons of powdered chicken base—a handy item to have in your camp kitchen box for adding a rich flavor to any soup or stew. Stir to dissolve the chicken base into the water. Place a lid on the pot and adjust the height of your pot or fire to bring the mixture to a simmer. Cook for 90 minutes.

Once both cans of biscuits have been cut into dumpling-sized strips, toss the strips in the seasoned flour to coat the surface. Once the pheasant has simmered until tender, add the floured dumplings to the pot a few at a time (stirring to blend as you do) until all dumplings are in the pot.

Return the lid and simmer, stirring every 15 minutes or so, for another hour until the dumplings have plumped and cooked through and the broth has thickened into a rich gravy.

GRILLED DOVE POPPERS

INGREDIENTS



15 doves, breasted out into 2 pieces of meat for each dove

Salt and pepper to taste

1 pound of bacon

One 8-ounce block of cream cheese

1 jar of sliced jalapeño peppers

½ white onion, cut into bite-sized pieces

If you’ve never made a dove popper, the process is pretty simple: You take one side of a breasted-out dove breast, smear it with a bit of cream cheese, and top it with a slice of jalapeño pepper and onion; then you wrap the whole thing up with a half slice of bacon, secure it with a toothpick, and toss it on the grill.

Dove breast is a lot like duck. It just tastes better when cooked to around medium or even slightly under. To prevent the dove meat from overcooking, I prefer to use relatively thin bacon for the recipe. Thin bacon does two things. First, it gets nice and crisp in a short enough time to prevent the dove breast from overcooking. Second, a single layer of thin bacon complements the flavor without overpowering the dove meat. There is nothing wrong with the taste of grilled bacon—I cook it that way all the time—but when I eat dove, I want to taste the dove.

Start by seasoning the dove breast well with salt and pepper. Use the thinnest bacon you can find. Cut the bacon down the center to make half slices.

Roll the popper tightly with bacon and secure with a toothpick. Repeat until all poppers are assembled.

Grill until the bacon is just cooked through and the dove is still medium doneness. Serve hot.

CRUNCHY KOREAN-STYLE FRIED QUAIL

INGREDIENTS

1 small yellow onion, grated

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 teaspoons salt, plus more for the coating mixture

1 teaspoon black pepper, plus more for coating

6–8 whole quail, skin on, or 8–10 skinned quail breasts

4 tablespoons Korean chili paste (gochujang)

2 tablespoons tomato ketchup

Juice of ½ lemon

¼ cup brown sugar

2 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds, plus more for garnish

1 cup cornstarch

½ cup all-purpose flour

Oil for deep-frying

Korean-style fried chicken is spicy, crispy, and super flavorful. This same cooking method works well for quail. Skin-on is best for extra flavor and

crispiness, but skinned quail breasts will work too, and they cook faster than whole birds.

Serve this dish for a main-course dinner or as an appetizer.

Combine the grated onion, garlic, salt, and pepper in a large bowl. Add the quail and toss well to coat. Cover and refrigerate for 1 to 2 hours.

In a separate bowl, mix the chili paste, ketchup, lemon juice, brown sugar, and sesame seeds. Drop the quail, one at a time, into the bowl and use your fingers to rub the seasoned paste into the quail skin. Set aside and repeat until all quail are coated.

Mix the cornstarch and flour. Add salt and pepper to taste. Heat a half-inch of oil in a large cast-iron skillet. Dredge the quail in the cornstarch-flour mixture, coating well.

Place the quail, three to four at a time, in the hot oil. Fry 8 to 10 minutes, turning a time or two, to brown and crisp the quail.

Sprinkle on a few additional sesame seeds just before serving.



CORNMEAL-CRUSTED BUTTERMILK QUAIL

INGREDIENTS

5–7 whole quail, skin on

2 tablespoons hot sauce

4 cups buttermilk

1 cup cornmeal

½ cup all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons salt

2 teaspoons black pepper

1 teaspoon paprika

½ teaspoon garlic powder

½ teaspoon cayenne pepper

Oil for frying

The quail was a favorite dish at GRIT in Taylor, Mississippi, just outside Oxford. I enjoyed it so much that I came home and tried to replicate the dish. While not the exact flavor we experienced at the restaurant, this dish comes pretty close. I serve it over a bed of creamy Parmesan risotto and alongside a sautéed blend of Granny Smith apples and butternut squash sprinkled with a pinch of salt and a bit of brown sugar.

If you find yourself near Taylor, stop in and give GRIT a try. Until then, try this recipe the next time you have a few quail in hand.

While wild quail are making a comeback around here, the bird numbers are still a far cry from where they were 40 years ago. Lucky for those of us who still enjoy following a pair of bird dogs, places like Bluegrass Game Birds in Taylorsville, Kentucky, raise healthy, flight-conditioned birds to help keep both dogs and hunters happy. They taste good, too.

After hunting, we dip the birds in a pan of 150°F water for a few minutes before plucking. Leaving the skin on adds flavor to the finished dish. Give it a try if you normally only breast out your birds; you will be surprised at how much tasty meat can be found on quail legs and thighs.

Start the recipe by stirring the hot sauce into the buttermilk in a large bowl. Add the quail and marinate at least 4 hours and up to overnight. Mix the cornmeal and flour, along with the salt, pepper, paprika, garlic powder, and cayenne. After marinating, lift the quail from the buttermilk and allow most of the excess to drain. Don’t drain the quail completely clean; a thin layer of buttermilk helps the cornmeal coating stick to the skin.

Gently roll the quail in the cornmeal mixture, coating all surfaces evenly. Move the quail to a wire rack to rest for 10 minutes. While the quail rests, heat 2 inches of oil in a heavy pot over medium-high heat or in a deep-fryer.

Once the oil reaches 350°F, lightly toss the quail in the cornmeal coating a second time. Gently lower the quail into the hot oil, taking care not to overcrowd the pan. Fry for 7 to 10 minutes, turning the quail once or twice as you go. Figure on one to two quail per person.

CAROLINA-STYLE VINEGAR-MARINATED FRIED QUAIL

INGREDIENTS

10 quail, plucked

Peanut oil for frying

BRINE MIX

4 cups water

2 cups white vinegar

1 cup apple cider vinegar

2 tablespoons salt

2 tablespoons mustard seed

1 tablespoon coriander seed

1 tablespoon black pepper

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1 spring of fresh dill

1 quart buttermilk

BREADING MIX

1.5 cups seasoned flour

1 cup fine cornmeal

1 teaspoon black pepper

In both North and South Carolina, the marinade of choice for brining chicken is a vinegar-based pickling solution. I tweaked the classic recipe a bit to customize it for quail, and it’s a winner.

The recipe starts with a mixture of apple cider and white vinegars, water, and some of the same pickling spices you would use when making crispy dills from the cucumbers in your garden. Since quail are a bit more delicate than the average chicken, we cut the brine time back to 2 hours for a lighter vinegar flavor. From there, the plucked birds move to a buttermilk soak to both add more flavor and tenderize the quail. To add a little crunch and texture to the coating mix, use a blend of seasoned flour and cornmeal.



Start by mixing the brine ingredients in a large bowl. Add the quail and refrigerate for 2 hours. Remove the quail after brining and rinse under running water. Pour the buttermilk into a bowl and add the quail. Let the quail soak in the buttermilk for 30 minutes.

Pour roughly an inch of peanut oil into a heavy cast-iron pan. Heat to 350°F. Carefully drop the quail into the grease, taking care not to crowd the pan. Fry the quail until cooked all the way through, about 10 minutes for medium-sized birds. Remove the quail from the hot oil and drain on a paper towel–lined platter.

Serve the fried quail over a bed of collard greens and add a wedge of your favorite cornbread recipe to round everything out.

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HOGS, BEAR, AND BIG CATS

ON THE SURFACE, THESE THREE MIGHT SEEM an odd group. Interestingly enough, the meat from these animals is similar—enough so that I often substitute one species for another in the same recipe.

By big cats, I mean mountain lions and bobcats. While the thought of eating a large cat is foreign to some, the meat is very good. When I describe it to someone who has never tried it before, I tell them it is more like lean pork in texture and appearance but tastes even better.

The meat from black bears can vary according to their diet. Bears that feed on nuts, acorns, berries, and the like are mild in flavor and make an excellent meal. Bears that feed on fish and aquatic vegetation can exhibit those flavors in the meat. It goes without saying that black bears living near human populations and who turn to garbage for sustenance will usually taste like you would expect, given their diet.

Besides being nearly interchangeable in recipes, all three of these meats carry the concern of *Trichinella spiralis* (the parasites that can cause the disease trichinosis in humans); thus it’s important to cook them to an adequate internal temperature to kill the parasites. The thickest part of the meat needs to reach 145°F for at least 3 minutes. Heating the meat to an internal temperature of 150°F is an easy way to ensure that it’s thoroughly cooked.

GRILLED WILD PORK WITH BOURBON CHERRY SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

2 large sweet potatoes, cut into bite-sized pieces

4 Granny Smith apples, cut into bite-sized pieces

1 tablespoon salt

8 ounces sliced shiitake mushrooms sautéed in 2 tablespoons butter

2–4 pounds pork loin chops, sliced about 1-inch thick

2 teaspoons black pepper

2 teaspoons ground sage

Walnuts (optional)

SAUCE

5 ounces dried cherries

1½ cup chicken stock

½ cup apple cider vinegar

¼ cup balsamic vinegar

½ cup Evan Williams Outdoorsman Bourbon

¼ cup brown sugar

2 tablespoons honey

2 tablespoons butter

This pork dish with tart cherries and bourbon is perfect for when the weather starts to cool. To give the meal even more of a fall feel, we serve the pork over a bed of roasted sweet potatoes and tart Granny Smith apples. It’s a meal everyone always loves.

Cut the sweet potatoes and apples and spread over a baking sheet. Season with salt. Roast at 350°F for 60 to 75 minutes or until the potatoes are done.

Add all of the sauce ingredients to a pan. Bring to a boil. Then reduce to a simmer. Stir occasionally while the rest of the meal cooks. Add 2 tablespoons of butter to a large skillet over medium heat. Sauté the mushrooms until they have released their moisture and cooked through.



Season the chops with salt, black pepper, and sage. Cook on a pellet or charcoal grill at around 350°F for 25 to 30 minutes or until the wild pork reaches 150°F—hot enough to kill any trichinosis parasites that might remain viable after freezing the meat.

To finish, spoon the sweet potato/apple mixture onto a plate. Top with a grilled pork chop. Add some sautéed mushrooms. Spoon over some sauce, and top with crunchy walnuts, if desired. At 150°F, the pork will still be tender and juicy.



STIR-FRIED SPICY WILD PORK

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds wild pork cut into thin strips

3 tablespoons vegetable or peanut oil

2 cups snow peas

2 cups baby bok choy cabbage

3–5 green onions, diced (plus 1 more cut into strips for garnish)

1–3 Thai chili peppers, chopped

½ cup hoisin sauce

¼ cup soy sauce

2 tablespoons honey

1 tablespoon freshly grated ginger

1 tablespoon tamarind paste

1 tablespoon garlic black bean paste

1 tablespoon chili crisps

9 ounces ramen-style noodles, cooked

For this stir-fry recipe, we used loin from an east Texas wild pig sliced into thin strips. You can also use the belly or shoulder. We stir-fried the pork with snow peas, baby bok choy cabbage, and green onions. For a bit of heat, we added a few Thai chili peppers. If you don’t like that much spice, leave them out or substitute a few chili flakes.

The recipe includes a few specialty ingredients like tamarind paste, garlic black bean paste, and chili crisps. You can find these in most large supermarkets or Asian grocery stores. If you don’t have those, just order them online. You will find these items handy for all sorts of recipes.

Gather vegetable ingredients, sauces, and seasonings. A good stir-fry moves fast, and you won’t have time to search for and measure ingredients.

Slice the pork into thin strips, against the grain for tenderness.

Heat 3 tablespoons of vegetable or peanut oil in a wok over high heat. Add the pork, in batches, stir-frying until cooked through and slightly crispy on the edges. Move pork to a warm plate.

Add additional oil, if needed. Stir-fry the vegetables until cooked through—but still crisp.

Return the pork to the wok and add the remaining ingredients except noodles. Stir to combine and thicken the sauce. Add the cooked noodles at

the end and toss to blend. Top with fine strips of green onion.

CLASSIC ROASTED WILD PORK

INGREDIENTS

3–4 pounds wild pork shoulder roast, tied to hold its shape while cooking

2 pounds red or gold fingerling

(new) potatoes

2 large onions, quartered

DRY RUB

½ cup brown sugar

1 tablespoon ground black pepper

1 tablespoon kosher salt

1½ teaspoons dried sage

1½ teaspoons garlic powder

1 teaspoon dried mustard

1 teaspoon smoked paprika

½ teaspoon dried onion powder

½ teaspoon cayenne pepper

½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

½ teaspoon ground cumin

½ teaspoon dried thyme

When cooking or processing any wild pork, trichinosis is always a concern. Luckily for wild game lovers, freezing wild pork for at least 30 days and cooking to 145°F internal temperature will kill any trichinella parasites that might be in the meat.

We roast the pork with potatoes and quartered onions to serve as a tasty side dish with the sliced pork. Roasting time will vary with size, but generally 1 to 2 hours will get the roast to 145°F in the center. A good digital thermometer is always helpful to ensure that your pork is hot enough to be safe but not overcooked and dried out.

Mix the dry rub ingredients and apply to all surface of the pork. Place the roast into a preheated 325°F oven and roast for 1 to 2 hours or until the center of the thickest part of the roast reads 145°F on a digital thermometer. Rest for 10 minutes before slicing. Toss the potatoes and onions in the pork drippings before serving.



HAWAIIAN WILD PORK RIBS

INGREDIENTS

2 slabs wild pork ribs

1 can sliced pineapple packed in juice (drain juice and reserve for sauce)

RUB

3 tablespoons brown sugar

2 tablespoons kosher or sea salt

2 tablespoons paprika

1½ teaspoons ground cumin

1½ teaspoons ground coriander

1½ teaspoons black pepper

MOP SAUCE

1 cup coconut milk

1 cup pineapple juice

1 cup lemon lime soda

1½ tablespoons tomato paste

½ cup brown sugar

1 tablespoon soy sauce

While the ribs on a wild pig aren’t as big and meaty as those from the barnyard cousins, they are still pork ribs and, by definition, extremely tasty. It takes a few more to make a meal; wild pork ribs make up for it in extra flavor and fast cooking times.

Next time you end up processing a wild hog, save the ribs and try this recipe for pork ribs with a Hawaiian twist.

Mix the rub ingredients and coat both sides of each slab of ribs well. Place the ribs on the smoker at 250°F.



While the ribs smoke, mix the sauce ingredients in a saucepan. Over medium heat, bring the sauce to a simmer, stirring occasionally. Continue to simmer the sauce for 30 minutes. Once the sauce is done, use it to mop the ribs as they smoke. Continue to mop occasionally while the ribs smoke for a total of 2 hours. Remove the ribs to a sheet of aluminum foil and mop once more before wrapping the ribs tightly in foil.

Return the ribs to the smoker for another hour. During the final 30 minutes of cooking time, open the foil so the glaze will set on the surface of the ribs. At the same time, add pineapple slices to the smoker so that they cook

through and obtain some nice grill marks. Serve the ribs and pineapple slices over white rice.



BAKED WILD PIG HAM WITH PEACH BOURBON GLAZE

INGREDIENTS

Skinned whole ham from a young wild pig

BRINE

1 gallon distilled water (additional water may be added if necessary to completely submerge ham)

1½ cups kosher salt

1 cup light brown sugar

2 tablespoons Instacure #1

GLAZE

1 cup peach preserves

1 cup orange juice

½ cup apricot all-fruit spread

½ cup bourbon

¼ cup honey

While wild pigs probably hadn’t made it all the way up the coast by the first Thanksgiving, the hogs the Pilgrims brought over with them were pretty well left to their own devices, foraging the woods for acorns, hickory nuts, grubs, and whatever else they might root up. The flavor of a wild pig ham would be instantly recognizable to the early settlers in the Plymouth Colony.

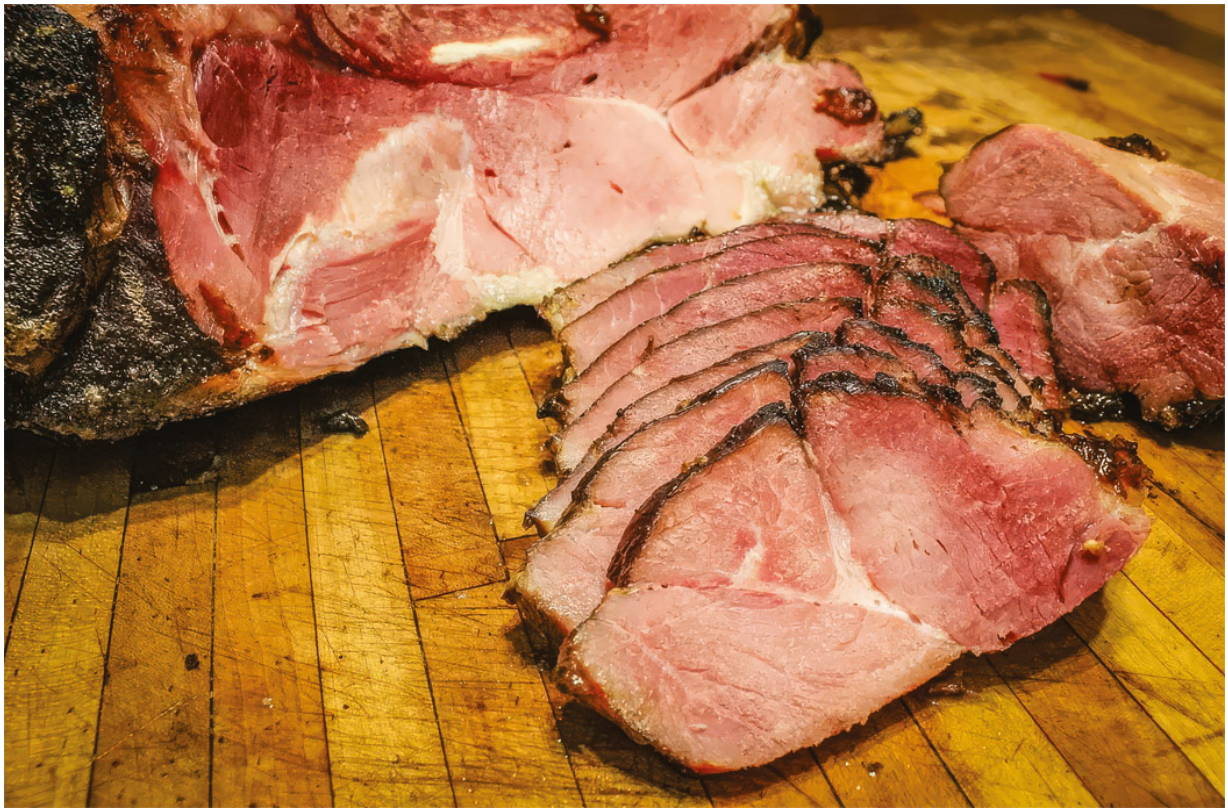
Although hams can be dry cured, the process takes many months. At around a week, wet cures are a much faster way to get a wild pig ham ready to bake. Wet cures rely on Instacure #1 to preserve the meat. Instacure #1 (also known as pink salt) contains 6.25 percent sodium nitrite and 93.75 percent table salt.

Start with a skinned whole ham from a young wild pig. This one weighed in at a bit over 8 pounds. Mix the brine ingredients in your brining container. To speed the process along, use a meat injection syringe to inject the brining solution directly into the ham in several locations. Doing this cuts the brining time by nearly a third.

Brined hams can be smoked or baked. For this one, we baked it with multiple applications of a Peach Bourbon Glaze to add another layer of flavor. Regardless of cooking method, take the ham up to around 165°F.

Mix all glaze ingredients in a saucepan over medium heat and bring to a slow simmer. Simmer for 5 to 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Place the ham in a large baking dish and into a 300°F preheated oven. After 30 minutes, use a pastry brush or mop to coat the ham with glaze. Repeat the glazing process every 30 minutes until the ham is done. Cook time will vary according to size, but start to monitor the internal temperature of the ham after 2½ hours. Once the ham has hit 165°F, remove it from the oven and glaze one last time. Cover the ham with foil and allow to rest for 30 minutes to 1 hour before slicing.



BRINE-CURED SMOKED BEAR HAM

INGREDIENTS

1 12–15-pound bone-in bear shoulder or ham, or you can debone and roll the ham if you prefer a boneless cut

BRINE

5 gallons of water

4 cups of brown sugar

4 cups of kosher salt

5 tablespoons Instacure #1

2 tablespoons pickling spice blend

GLAZE

1 cup apricot preserves

½ cup soy sauce

1 teaspoon smoked paprika

One of our favorite things to do with bear is to cure an entire shoulder or hindquarter into a ham. We then smoke it on the Traeger Grill to an internal temperature of 165°F and slice for a main course.

We were recently gifted a bone-in ham from a young bear taken by a good friend. The quarter weighed in right at 15 pounds—perfect for curing into a ham. If you have plenty of time, you can leave a quarter that size soaking in the curing brine for up to a month to ensure that the cure works its way all the way into the meat. I don’t have that kind of patience, so I use a marinade injector to pump the brine into the meat and let it soak for around 10 to 14 days.

This recipe uses Instacure #1 (also known as Prague Powder, or pink curing salt) as the curing agent. While most recipes call for 1 teaspoon of Instacure per 5 pounds of meat when blended into sausages or ground jerky, a wet brine uses more. I prefer 1 level tablespoon of Instacure per gallon of water in my wet brines.

Mix the cure ingredients in a large plastic or glass container. A food-grade 5-gallon bucket works in a pinch. Trim most of the fat from the outside of the ham. A thick layer of fat slows down the intake of the curing brine.

Submerge the bear ham in the curing brine. Using a marinade injector, pump the ham full of the brine. Pay particular attention to the center of the ham and the areas along the bone. Inject the ham in several places. While you can’t pump too much brine into the meat, you can definitely pump too

little. I keep injecting the meat until I see brine push out of the injection holes around the probe as I pump more into the meat.

Allow the ham to remain in the brine for 10 to 14 days, turning once daily so that all of the ham is exposed equally. If your ham floats, use a glass bowl or container to weigh it down so that it is fully submerged.

Once the ham has cured, remove it from the brine and rinse the surface with cold water. Place the ham on a wire rack in a large pan or directly on the refrigerator shelf overnight to allow the surface to dry and a pellicle to form.

Start smoking the ham at 225°F. After 4 hours at the lower temperature, increase the temperature of your grill to 325°F. Mix the glaze ingredients and brush the glaze over the surface of the ham. Continue cooking at 325°F for 2 to 3 more hours or until the center of the ham reaches 165°F. Brush remaining glaze over the ham every 30 minutes for the remaining cook time.

CRISPY MOUNTAIN LION BACKSTRAP MILANESE

INGREDIENTS

1–2 pounds of mountain lion backstrap, sliced into 1-inch cutlets

Salt and pepper

1 cup panko breadcrumbs

½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese

2 tablespoons dried Italian seasoning blend

Oil for frying

Lemon wedges for serving

Big cat meat is lean, white, and flavorful. It’s actually delicious, very close to pork in both flavor and texture. In fact, pretty much any recipe that calls for pork can be made from either mountain lion or bobcat. When a buddy recently offered up a section of backstrap from his lion, I jumped at the opportunity.

For this recipe, I use medallions of mountain lion backstrap to make the classic, simple Italian Milanese: meat breaded with a blend of breadcrumbs and Parmesan cheese, fried to a crispy golden brown, and hit with a squeeze of lemon at serving. The exceptional flavor belies the simplicity. Your dinner guests won’t believe how easy it is to make.

Start by slicing the backstrap into 1-inch-thick cutlets. Place each cutlet between sheets of plastic wrap or into a plastic bag. Pound the meat down to a quarter-inch to a half-inch thickness with a meat mallet. Season the meat on both sides with salt and pepper.



Blend the breadcrumbs (I used panko breadcrumbs here), Parmesan cheese, and Italian seasoning in a shallow dish. Heat a quarter-inch of olive or vegetable oil in a heavy skillet over medium-high heat.

Once the oil is hot, dredge the meat on both sides in the breadcrumb mixture.

Fry for 4 to 5 minutes per side until golden brown. Much like bear and wild hog meat, mountain lion needs to be cooked medium to medium-well for safety. Shoot for an internal temperature of 160°F. Also, in order to make

sure any parasites are taken care of, freeze the meat for at least 21 days before cooking. Wash all knives and utensils well with hot, soapy water.

Don’t overcrowd the pan. Leave space between each cutlet so they brown evenly. Fry the meat in batches if needed, moving the finished cutlets to a warm platter while you continue cooking the remaining meat.

I like to serve the Milanese over a bed of pasta or rice. Add lemon wedges so that your guests can squeeze the fresh juice over the cutlet before eating.

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FISH AND OTHER SWIMMING STUFF

FRESH OR SALTWATER—IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER. I just love to fish. And I love to cook and eat fish, along with all sorts of other aquatic-style creatures. While it is hard to beat cornmeal-dusted fried fish, there are plenty of other ways to cook up a fish. Here are some of my favorites.

FRIED CATFISH AND GRITS BREAKFAST BOWL

INGREDIENTS

Peanut oil or Crisco

1–2 pounds catfish fillets

Cornmeal breading

1–2 eggs per serving, fried to desired doneness

CHEESE GRITS

2 cups water

1 teaspoon salt

2 cups half-and-half

1 cup stone-ground grits

2 tablespoons butter

1 cup shredded sharp cheddar cheese

One of my favorite breakfasts is crispy fried catfish atop a bowl of creamy cheese grits. Top it with a fried egg or two, and add a dash of hot sauce if your morning palate desires a bit of spice.

To make really good cheese grits, first start with exceptional grits. Don’t buy the off-the-shelf instant grits at your local grocer. Instead, find a nice

whole corn, preferably stone-ground, old-fashioned white or yellow grits.

For the catfish, we use boneless fillets fried the old-fashioned way—in seasoned cornmeal. You can season the cornmeal to your desired taste or just find a cornmeal-based fish breading you enjoy. For best results, fry in peanut oil or Crisco. I like to cook the fillets to a nice golden brown with extra crispy edges. If you are sleeping in on a weekend, this dish makes the perfect brunch.

Start with the grits. Add the water, salt, and half-and-half to a pan or small pot. Bring to a boil. Add the grits. Reduce heat. Cover and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes, stirring often.



When the grits are about ready, stir in the butter and cheese. Simmer 5 more minutes, and then remove from heat to rest.

While the grits simmer, heat a half-inch of oil or shortening in a large skillet. Dredge the fillets in seasoned cornmeal.

Once the oil reaches 325°F to 350°F, add the fish, taking care not to overcrowd the pan. Fry for 3 to 4 minutes per side, depending on thickness, until the fish is flaky, golden brown, and crispy. Move to a paper towel–lined tray while you continue to fry the remaining fish.

To plate, spoon cheese grits into a bowl. Top with one to two fried catfish fillets and a fried egg. I’m going out on a limb and trusting that y’all know how to fry an egg without instruction. Top with hot sauce, if desired.



GRILLED BLACKENED HONEY LAKE TROUT

INGREDIENTS

5 lemons, sliced

3 lake trout fillets, skin-on

4 tablespoons blackening seasoning blend

½ stick butter, cut into 12 pats

4 tablespoons honey

1 lemon, wedged

One of my favorite ways to prepare any type of trout or salmon is grilled over a wood fire. I kept the preparation simple for this one. A cedar plank, a layer of lemon slices, a sprinkle of our favorite blackening seasoning blend, a few pats of butter, and a drizzle of spring honey from our beehives were all the fresh fish needed.

I prefer skin-on for this preparation, but the layer of lemon slices will keep skinned fillets from sticking if you would rather go that route. If you don’t have a cedar plank handy, you can grill the fish on foil or in a grill basket.

Start by soaking your cedar planks in water for a minimum of 30 minutes to prevent flaming while the fish is on the grill. Start your charcoal so that it has burned down to a nice bed of coals when you are ready to grill.

Season the meat side of the fish all over with the blackening seasoning.

Layer sliced lemons to completely cover the cedar planks. Lay on the fish fillets.

Top each fillet with four pats of butter. Drizzle honey over the top of the fish. Place one or two lemon slices on top of the fish.

Rest the fish for 5 minutes or so after removing it from the grill. The flesh should lift easily from the skin, making it easy to serve and eat. Serve with lemon wedges for squeezing over the fish at the table.

GOLDEN FRIED MULLET AND ROE

INGREDIENTS

Peanut oil for frying

2–3 pounds fresh mullet fillets

2 cups of your favorite seasoned cornmeal fish breading

Roe from the cleaned mullet

Cooler fall temperatures—with cool being relative for Florida—see mullet runs pick up along the Gulf Coast. Even better, many of those mullet are filled with roe, a delicacy in much of the world.

After a successful trip to net a few nice-sized mullet, we filleted several and saved the roe. Mullet roe can be either white or yellow, with a long-standing debate as to which tastes better when rolled in cornmeal and fried. I'm firmly in the yellow camp.

I like boneless fillets for fried mullet. Many native Floridians also keep the backbone and tail from the fish to fry up when they are cooking. While the crunchy tail is delicious, there isn't enough meat on it for me to go to the trouble. I take the skin off my mullet fillets so that I can trim away any dark red meat, but lots of folks claim the fried skin is the best part and simply scale the fish to leave the skin on. Try it both ways and decide for yourself.

When frying mullet roe sacks, which can reach several inches in length, take care when skinning and cooking to keep the sacks intact. If you nick

the outer casing, it isn’t the end of the world, but some of the eggs will spill out during the cooking process. Mullet roe comes out in two loosely attached sections. Gently pull the sections apart to fry individually. Remove the dark strip of material between the two sections before cooking. Don’t overcook your roe. Simply roll it in your favorite seasoned cornmeal fish breading and fry in hot oil for a few minutes per side until the surface is crisp and golden. If you overcook the roe, you lose a lot of the great flavor and the texture isn’t as pleasing.



Heat a half-inch of peanut oil in a cast-iron skillet to 350°F. Roll the mullet fillets in the breading until generously coated on all sides.

Fry, in batches, for 3 to 5 minutes per side or until crispy golden brown and just cooked through. Move to a paper-lined warm plate and repeat until all fish is done.

Once all of the fish has been fried, reduce the heat to medium. Gently roll the roe sacks in the cornmeal mixture.

Carefully transfer the breaded roe to the hot oil. Take care, as the roe often pops and splatters at first. Fry the roe to a golden brown (2 to 3 minutes per side). Don’t overcook the roe.

Serve with your favorite sides like white beans, slaw, and hush puppies.

FLOUNDER-STYLE FRIED GIANT BLUEGILL

INGREDIENTS

1–2 giant bluegill, gutted and scaled

2 packs of your favorite seafood fry breading or seasoned cornmeal

Oil or shortening for frying

My standard two ways to cook bluegills are to fillet the big ones and pan-fry the smaller ones whole, skinless or scaled with the skin on. Most of what we catch are hand-sized or a little smaller, which are common across most of the fish's home range.

A couple of times a year, we take a trip down to a buddy's place in the Deep South. His lake is stocked with giant hybrid bluegills. Some of these fish push the 2-pound mark, and every now and then, you'll hook into one that surpasses even that. Occasionally, we'll keep one or two of these monsters for the table.

Conventional wisdom on a fish this size would be to fillet it. But for these, we took a note from our saltwater flounder recipes. Start by gutting and scaling the fish. You can leave the head on or take it off. My wife has a thing about eating anything with a face, so I usually take the head off.

Next, use a sharp fillet knife to score the fish in a diamond crosshatch pattern down to the spine. This method packs more breading into the fillet

and allows the hot oil to reach down into the meat so that the outer surface doesn’t overcook before the thick center portion gets done.

Roll the scored fish in your favorite fish breading. (I used Andy’s Red for this batch.) Sprinkle some into the scored cuts.

While you bread the fish, heat a half-inch of oil or vegetable shortening in a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. I like 325°F to 350°F for the cooking temperature of the grease.

Gently lower the fish into the hot grease. Fry for 5 to 10 minutes per side or until the fish is cooked through and flakes away under light pressure from a fork. Depending on size, you might need to do one fish at a time to fit in your skillet.

Drain the fish on a wire rack or paper-lined plate while you continue frying the rest of your catch. Serve with fries and slaw for a full meal that even the most expensive seafood restaurants can’t match.

PARMESAN HERB-FRIED SHEEPSHEAD



INGREDIENTS

Oil for frying

¾ cup grated Parmesan cheese

1 cup Italian herb–seasoned fine breadcrumbs

1–2 pounds sheepshead fillets, cut into small pieces

Cheese grits for serving

I like to fish for tasty sheepshead with live shrimp around structures like bridge pilings, piers, and rock piles. One of my favorite simple recipes for sheepshead, or any flaky white fish, is this blend of grated Parmesan cheese and herbed breadcrumbs. Use good Parmesan for this one, not the cheap stuff in the plastic can.

Sheepshead can be a bit tough to fillet because of their heavy scales. Just start behind the head and begin your cut with your knife facing forward on the fish to slide the blade between the scales. Once you are in, turn the knife and fillet as normal.

Blend roughly equal amounts or just slightly more breadcrumbs to the cheese. Since the cheese burns easily, cut your fillets into small pieces that will cook quickly. Don’t overheat your oil; medium to medium-high is perfect. I use peanut oil for this dish, but vegetable or even olive oil will work.

Heat about a half-inch of oil in a large skillet. While the oil comes to temperature, blend the cheese and the herbed breadcrumbs together. Dredge the fillets in the breadcrumb mixture, pressing lightly to make sure all surfaces are well coated.

Gently lower the fish into the hot oil. Fry for 2 to 4 minutes per side, flipping halfway through. Move the fried fish to a paper-lined platter and continue frying until all the fish is cooked.

My favorite way to serve this one is over a bed of spicy beer cheese grits. Cook your grits according to package instructions, and then stir in your favorite brand of spicy beer cheese until you reach the flavor and texture you are happy with. Pile the fried sheepshead over the grits and enjoy.

LOUISIANA-STYLE BLUE CRAB BOIL

INGREDIENTS

Bag of Crawfish, Shrimp and Crab boil from Southern Boyz Outdoors

3 pounds small red potatoes (if you don’t have small potatoes, just cut regular red potatoes in half)

4 heads of garlic with the tops cut off to expose the cloves

2 large onions, skin-on, cut in half

3–5 lemons, halved

3 pounds frozen corn on the cob

2 pounds smoked sausage, cut into sections

10–15 fresh-caught blue crabs

2–3 pounds shell-on shrimp

I’m a big blue crab fan. Along the East Coast, particularly around Virginia and Maryland, the blue crabs get steamed with Old Bay or J.O.’s seasoning blends. Along the Gulf Coast, from western Florida around to Louisiana, those same blue crabs get boiled in a spicy broth, usually with corn, potatoes, and smoked sausage. I like to add some fresh Gulf shrimp to the pot as well.

The easiest way to catch several crabs in a hurry is to use a trap just like the commercial crabbers use. The wire box has a compartment for bait and slots to allow the crabs to swim in. Funnel-shaped backs on the slots make it hard for the crabs to find their way back out.

With the traps, you can set them in the morning and just check them a couple of times a day. Move the eating-sized crabs to a cooler full of ice with the plug open so that any melted water drains away.

When you have enough crabs (I like two to three per person when I also have shrimp; there isn’t a ton of meat on a blue crab), do up your boil. A large pot and a propane burner make it easy to cook this meal outside, keeping kitchen mess at a minimum.



Start your boil with 4 to 5 gallons of clean water. Start the burner and bring the water to a boil. Add your desired amount of seasoning blend. When the

mixture comes back to a boil, add the potatoes, garlic, onion, and lemon. Cook the potatoes for 10 to 12 minutes.

Add the corn, sausage, and crabs.

Boil for 5 minutes. Add the shrimp, bring the liquid back to a boil, and then turn off the burner. Cover the pot, and let the boil soak for 10 to 15 minutes to allow the spice to permeate the crabs and shrimp.

To serve, drain the liquid from the pot and dump the boil into large disposable aluminum pans or onto a newspaper-lined table. Enjoy with a cold brew and some garlic bread. Coleslaw makes a nice side dish. Serves five to nine.

CRISPY FRIED SOFT-SHELL CRAB



INGREDIENTS

1–2 soft-shell crabs per person

1 egg, beaten

1 cup milk

2 cups Kentucky Kernel or other seasoned flour

Oil or lard for frying

There was a time when Smith Island, Maryland, had well over a thousand permanent residents, including hundreds of watermen who made a living fishing the Chesapeake Bay for crabs and oysters. There were processing plants, thriving commercial docks, and way more houses than exist there now.

Erosion and the decline of the commercial fishing industry have taken their toll on the island. Today, what once was a larger mass of land has eroded into three separate, smaller island communities that make up Smith Island proper. The town of Ewell is the largest, with a population approaching 200. Tylerton and Rhodes Point are down to around 40 residents per town.

Smith Island has always been known as the blue crab capital of Maryland, and a few die-hard crabbers still remain, setting traps, dredging, and tonging to bring in tasty blue crabs. Other longtime watermen, like Eddie Corbin, will take guests out for a private tour of surrounding marsh areas to see wildlife and learn the history of the area.

An unusual thing happens to blue crabs in the spring of the year. They molt, shedding their hard shell. For a day or two, the soft crabs are completely edible, shell and all. Crabbers sometimes catch the soft-shell crabs, but everything in the water, from fish to birds to people, love to eat them, so soft crabs tend to not move around much, preferring to stay hidden.

What crabbers do catch are hard-shelled crabs that are almost ready to shed. Known as “peelers,” these crabs have a red outline on their swim fins. Watermen like Danny Tyler take these peeler crabs and place them in tanks along the docks or in covered “peeler sheds” where they run a constant current of water from the bay over the crabs, watching closely until they shed their hard shells. It’s a full-time job, as once they shed, the outer shell immediately starts to harden. Just a few hours after shedding, the crabs are known as paper shells, since the main back shell has a papery feel to it. It’s still edible, but not as delectable as a true soft-shell.

The reason the crabs molt each spring is that their growth inside the shell over the previous winter makes it too tight. When they shed their hard shell, the resulting soft crab is often much larger than the shell it came from. Danny says it is common to see the body size on a soft crab grow by an inch or more after shedding.

It’s important to make sure you buy your blue crabs from a reputable source and that the crabs either are fresh and still alive or were fresh frozen, straight from the water. If you buy fresh, keep your crabs in a cooler on ice or refrigerated until ready to prepare. One of the good things about handling live soft-shell crabs is that they can’t pinch the way the hard-shell version can.

To prepare a soft-shell crab for frying, start by rinsing it well under cold water. Use a pair of kitchen shears to cut along the front of the crab, just behind the eyes. Discard the front part or “face” of the crab.

Next, lift the apron from the bottom of the crab. On males, it will be a long, thin point; in females, it is a wider triangle shape. Just lift it with a blade from your shears and either cut it away or just twist it off.

If you want to leave the back on, lift one side and remove the feathery gills from underneath. Just use your fingernail, a kitchen knife, or one side of your shears to rake it off. Let the shell fall back and repeat the process with the other side. If you decide to remove the back entirely, just peel it away, exposing the gills and making it easy to remove them. The yellow paste inside is affectionately known as the “mustard,” and many crab lovers relish the added flavor. If you aren’t quite to that point, you can rinse it away under cold water. That’s it. The crab is now ready to fry. Clean all remaining crabs before frying.

Start by mixing one beaten egg with 1 cup of milk in a shallow dish. For the breading, I prefer preseasoned Kentucky Kernel flour, or you can season your own flour to your liking, with salt, pepper, garlic powder, Old Bay, J.O. No. 2 Crab Seasoning, or whatever spices you prefer. You can also use just about any premixed and seasoned fried chicken breading. Heat a quarter-inch of vegetable oil or lard in a large skillet over medium-high heat.

Dip the cleaned crab in the egg wash.

Next, move it to the seasoned flour, flipping to evenly coat both sides. Gently lower the crab into the hot oil. Take care: Soft-shell crabs tend to pop and splatter when they hit the hot oil.

Repeat with remaining crabs. Fry in batches so you don’t overcrowd the pan. After 3 to 4 minutes, gently flip the crabs and continue frying for another 2 to 3 minutes or until the crust is crispy and golden. Don’t overcook, or the crabs will be mushy and a bit rubbery.

I like to serve fried soft-shells with corn on the cob and roasted or boiled red potatoes or rice.

MARYLAND-STYLE STEAMED BLUE CRAB

INGREDIENTS

6–8 blue crabs per guest

12 ounces beer or water

12 ounces white vinegar

J.O. No. 2 Crab Seasoning

Steamed versus boiled: What’s the best way to cook a blue crab?

Each method has its own pros and cons. When it comes to boiled crabs, the seasoning works its way deep into the meat. That can be a good or a bad thing, depending on how much spice you enjoy. Team Steam will say that the soaked-in seasoning overpowers the crab’s sweet and delicate flavor. It’s easier to overcook crabs by boiling as well, resulting in mushy meat.

Eastern Shore folks (especially Maryland crabbers) insist that steaming lets the flavor of the crab shine through. Steamed crab gets seasoned on the outside, and that seasoning works its way to the meat as you pick the crab.

When it comes to seasoning, many, especially along the upper Eastern Shore, enjoy the Old Bay brand. But down in Maryland, there’s a local brand that’s a favorite. James Ozzle Strigle and his wife, Dot, started J.O. Spice Company in 1945 when they began making seasoning blends and selling them directly to Baltimore fishermen and restaurants. The spicy blend was a hit, and today the company sells hundreds of products all over

the world. Their two most popular spice blends are J.O. No. 1 and No. 2. I prefer the No. 2 option for steaming straight crabs without any other ingredients.

You can catch blue crabs in a number of ways. You can drop a baited wire or net trap off a dock or shoreline; you can tie a piece of chicken to a string and lower it into the water for a crab to grab hold and then gently scoop it up with a net just before it turns loose its prize; or, if you are around the crab capital of Maryland, Smith Island, you simply mention at the docks that you would like some fresh crab, and a lifelong crabber like Lee Smith will show up at your door the next morning with a basketful.

However you get them, you need a bit of gear to steam crabs. First, a large pot with a lid. Next, something to hold the crabs up off the bottom of the pot and out of the liquid. A folding steam basket is made for the task. If you don’t have one, simply roll up some snakes of aluminum foil and coil them in the bottom of your pot. That’s about it.



As for the steaming liquid, you can use water, but a good pilsner beer is hard to beat. To that, add an equal amount of white vinegar. The vinegar helps soften the crab shells, making picking easier. You just need enough to make some steam—one beer or an equal amount of water plus the vinegar is usually enough. You need around an inch of total liquid in the bottom of your pot.

The method is a simple one. Add your liquid to the pot, put in a layer of fresh blue crabs (put them on ice or in the refrigerator for an hour or two before handling to minimize pinching activities), and then sprinkle on some J.O. seasoning of your choice. Don’t worry about overdoing it; the bulk of the seasoning stays on the outer shell. I use a full 8-ounce bag per dozen crabs. Add another layer of crab, some more seasoning, and so on until the pot is full. Place the lid on the pot and put it on a medium-high burner.

Once the liquid starts to boil and make steam, leave the lid closed for 8 to 12 minutes. Smaller crabs need around 8 minutes, and large or jumbos go for 12 minutes. The shells will turn bright red as the crabs steam.

So how do you eat a steamed crab? With your hands, the way nature intended. You can use a few tools like a crab mallet or crab cracker for the hard claws, but everything else can be done with your fingers.

Start by tearing off the claws and legs. There’s meat to be had in those, so don’t toss them out. Use a claw to get under the hard back shell and lift it off. You can use your thumbnail for this task, but if you eat as many crabs as I do at a sitting, you’ll have a sore thumb for a few days. The claw is a handy tool for the task.

Next, use your fingers to brush away the gills. Everything else is edible. The yellow “mustard” inside the body of the crab is delicious, but it is an acquired taste. You don’t have to eat it if you don’t want.

Break the crab in half. The bulk of the meat lies just inside where the claws and legs attach. Simply peel away the shell to get to it. Next, crack the heavy claws and extract the meat. Finally, finish up the larger sections of leg. I often break these sections and then suck the meat out sort of like using a straw.

A blue crab isn’t overly blessed with edible meat, so cook plenty. I like at least a dozen large for every two dinner guests.



PARMESAN-CRUSTED HYBRID STRIPED BASS WITH LEMON CREAM SAUCE

INGREDIENTS

1 pound any white flaky fish fillets like hybrid striped bass

Salt and pepper to taste

½ cup Italian-style breadcrumbs

½ cup grated Parmesan cheese

Oil

LEMON CREAM SAUCE

1 cup white wine

½ cup heavy cream

Juice of 2 lemons

1 stick cold butter, cut into small pieces

Salt and pepper to taste

Regardless of how we prepare the fish—pan-seared, baked, or grilled—this is one of my favorite sauces to spoon over the top. In addition to fish, it's perfect for grilled turkey, vegetables, you name it.

Since the sauce demands nearly constant attention, I like to do it first and then set it aside while I cook the fish. Start with 1 cup of your favorite white wine in a medium saucepan over high heat. I tend to go with a sweeter wine for this one, since the concentrated flavors pair well with lemon. Bring it to a boil. Keep boiling it heavily until it reduces by at least half.

Once it has reduced, add a half cup of heavy cream. Bring that to a heavy, rolling boil, stirring as needed to keep it from boiling over. Reduce this mixture by at least half. It will take 10 to 15 minutes. You will notice the bubbles get larger as the sauce reduces and thickens. Once the wine and cream are reduced by half or more, squeeze in the juice of two lemons.

Remove the pan from the heat, stir the liquid around to let it cool a bit, and then slowly start to whisk in the butter, one pat at a time. Don't stop whisking and don't walk away, or the sauce will break. Only after each addition of butter has fully melted and incorporated into the sauce do you add the next pat. Keep doing this until all the butter has been added. The sauce should be thick and creamy. Add salt and pepper to taste. Set the sauce aside. The residual heat from the pan will keep it warm while you cook the fish.

Instead of the usual cornmeal crust, season the fillets with a bit of salt and pepper, and then dredge LIGHTLY in a 50-50 blend of Italian-style

breadcrumbs and grated Parmesan cheese. Don’t go overboard. You just want enough to give the fish a very light crust.

While you dredge the fish, heat roughly an eighth of an inch of oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Use just enough to cover the bottom of the pan evenly. Once the oil is hot, gently add the fish, taking care not to overcrowd the pan. Now, don’t touch it. Don’t shake the pan, and don’t try to lift the fish to make sure it doesn’t stick. Just leave it alone and let it develop a nice crust.

Let the fish tell you when it is time to flip. It should completely release from the pan. This will probably take 2 to 4 minutes, depending on pan temperature. Gently flip the fish and repeat. Once the fish has cooked through and is flaky, move it to a warm platter and finish any fish that wouldn’t fit in the first batch.

Place the fish over a bed of rice, and then spoon over the warm lemon butter sauce just before serving.

OLD FLORIDA FISHING TOWN SMOKED MULLET

INGREDIENTS

5–10 mullet, butterflied

Everglades All-Purpose Barbecue or other BBQ rub

BRINE

2 gallons clean water

2 cups kosher salt

1 cup firmly packed brown sugar

2 tablespoons Zatarain’s liquid crab boil with garlic and onion (optional)

Mullet fishermen in Florida traditionally used gill nets to haul in boatloads of fish, but the Florida net ban of 1995 drastically changed the way they went about making a living. Today, most of the mullet are caught in hand-thrown cast nets. There was a time when every truck you’d see along the coast carried a 5-gallon bucket with a prized (often custom-made) net in the bed. Today, a surging influx of folks moving to these towns from other areas have cut down on the number of people who still carry a net and know how to use it, but you can still find a few of these born-and-raised fishermen in just about any coastal town.

We tagged along with good friends and Florida natives Rusty and Donna Crum on a recent trip to Apalachicola. Rusty expertly separated his net into sections, tossing a third of the weight over his shoulder and cradling the rest

across his arm and in his hand. Holding the leading edge of the net between his teeth, Rusty stared intently into the slightly tannic waters of the bay, watching the school of mullet cruise along toward our waiting position. Taking his height above the water and the wind speed and direction into account, Rusty launched his net into a perfect circle that settled over the bulk of the fish. The mullet flashed and darted as they tried to escape the closing net, but with just about every cast, a few more made it to the waiting cooler.

Once we had enough for several meals, we headed back to skin the fish. For smoking, split the mullet down the back, cutting along one side of the spine all the way down (but not through) the skin of the belly. Open the fish like a book, with the belly of the fish acting as the spine.

There will be a dark lining around the belly cavity. It needs to be removed. Just scrape it away with your fingers or a butter knife and then rinse. Backbone in or out is a personal choice, but most old-school mullet smokers like to leave it in on one side of the fish because they say it adds flavor.



Start the process by brining the fish for 2 to 3 hours. I prefer to use a cooler for this task with just enough ice to keep the brine cold. After brining, the mullet need to dry before smoking. I remove them one at a time from the brine, give each a quick rinse under cold water, and then pat dry with a paper towel. From there, I move the fish to wire racks or sheet pans, skin side down, and place them in front of a fan for another hour to dry the fish and form a sticky pellicle on the surface of the meat.

From there, they are ready to smoke. Techniques vary from hot-and-fast to low-and-slow, but I like 2 to 3 hours at 185°F to 200°F over hickory or a mix of hickory and apple. For this trip, we packed along our Traeger Ranger portable grill, and it was perfect for a few batches of smoked mullet.

When it comes to seasoning the mullet before smoking, some are purists, adding only a bit of black pepper. Cajun seasoning is popular, as is Old Bay. My favorite is a good, slightly sweet BBQ rub like the Everglades All-Purpose. Just sprinkle your choice of seasoning over the meat side of the fish.

Place the mullet skin side down on your smoker. Smoke at 185°F to 200°F for 2 to 3 hours. The finished product should be firm, with a deep mahogany color on the surface of the meat, but not completely dried. The meat itself should be flaky and white when peeled away from the skin.

Eat your smoked mullet as is, shred it and blend into your favorite dip recipe, or try smoked mullet eggs Benedict for a new twist on a breakfast classic.



GARLIC PARMESAN CRAPPIE

INGREDIENTS

2 pounds crappie fillets

2 teaspoons lemon pepper

2 tablespoons mayonnaise

Spray butter or olive oil

BREADING

1 cup panko breadcrumbs

1 cup Parmigiano Reggiano cheese, freshly grated

3 cloves garlic, minced

3 tablespoons fresh parsley, finely chopped

3 tablespoons melted butter

2 tablespoons olive oil

½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

Salt and cracked black pepper to taste

This recipe provides the crunch of fried fish, the flavor of Parmesan cheese and garlic, and just a hint of heat from red pepper flakes.

A thin layer of mayonnaise helps the breading stick to the fish. I’m not a huge mayo fan, but you don’t really taste it in this recipe. If you can’t stand the thought of mayo, use plain yogurt or brush on a layer of melted butter. Always use freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano cheese for extra flavor.

Start by mixing the breading ingredients. Set the mixture aside.

Season the fillets with lemon pepper. Use a grill brush to apply a light coating of mayo to the top of the crappie fillets.

Arrange the fillets on a parchment-lined cookie sheet sprayed with a thin layer of olive oil or butter. Spoon some of the breading mixture over each fillet, pressing it down with the back of the spoon so that it sticks. I shoot for roughly a quarter-inch of breading on each fillet. Spray the coated fish with a light layer of olive oil or spray butter.

Arrange the oven rack so that it is around 6 inches below the broiler. Once the oven is hot, place the pan under the broiler. Cook for 10 to 12 minutes or until the breading is crisp and golden and the fish is just cooked through.

CHARGRILLED OYSTERS

INGREDIENTS

2 dozen shucked oysters, in the bottom shell

1 pound butter

1 entire head of garlic, finely chopped

1 large bunch of fresh flat-leaf parsley, chopped

1 teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon dried oregano

3 ounces grated Parmesan cheese or a blend of Parmesan and Romano cheeses

We've been hanging out in the small Florida town of Apalachicola for nearly 25 years now.

One of the first things we noticed about the bay was the oystermen and -women who depended on it to make a living. They still did it old-school here: Wooden boats (often hand-built) and long oyster tongs used to rake along the submerged beds, pulling up clumps of oysters to be hand-sorted according to size. We'd grab our coffee and head down to the waterfront at dawn to watch the fleet head out each morning.

The Apalachicola Bay has been home to some of the best-tasting oysters in the world since well before the first Europeans ever set foot on the continent. Archaeological digs have dated civilizations in the area as far back as 15,000 years. Fresh water flowing down the Apalachicola River

blended with salt water from the Gulf of Mexico to form the perfect habitat for oysters, and the natives ate them with gusto, mounding piles of shells like small mountains. Many of those shell mounds still exist today.

Sadly, recent years have seen a serious decline in the local oyster population. It isn't any one factor that has impacted the oysters, but rather a combination of things. Increased water demands on the river as it flows through urban and farm areas of Georgia have decreased the amount of fresh water flowing into the bay. And a man-made cut that now separates St. George Island from Little St. George, built to give commercial and recreational boat traffic a faster route to the Gulf, has increased the amount of salt water flowing into the lower portion of the bay. This situation has raised salinity levels to the point that saltwater predators like black drum have encroached into the bay area, feeding heavily on the immature oysters in the beds.



Luckily, there are still places along the Panhandle where you can wade out and pick up a few oysters for yourself if you are in the mood. And, absent the commercial harvest for the prized Apalach oyster, a new industry of farmed oysters in the Bay has emerged.

Wherever you get your oysters, use a few in this recipe, my second favorite behind just eating them raw with a splash of Crystal hot sauce. You'll need a hot grill, but the resulting salty, smoky treat is worth it.

While shucking the oysters, take care to preserve as much of the briny liquid as possible inside the bottom shell. Leave the oyster attached to the bottom shell to prevent it slipping off and down into the coals as the oysters grill.

Melt the butter in a saucepan. Add the garlic, parsley, black pepper, and oregano. Simmer the mixture until the garlic softens (around 6 to 8 minutes). Remove the butter mixture from the heat and stir in the cheese.

Spoon the garlic butter onto each oyster, allowing a bit to spill over onto the coals, causing flames to flare up and around the oysters.

Garnish with a pinch of the remaining chopped parsley. Serve with lemon wedges and hot sauce, if desired.



GRILLED REDFISH ON THE HALF SHELL

INGREDIENTS

3 tablespoons butter

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 redfish, or other heavy skinned fish, filleted, skin on

Salt and pepper

3 tablespoons of your favorite blackening seasoning or BBQ rub

No one can argue that redfish (also known as red drum, puppy drum, or red bass, depending on location) aren't one of the tastier fish that swims. In fact, after famed Chef Paul Prudhomme introduced this country to his blackened redfish recipe, we almost ate them out of existence. Thankfully, through sound management and increased harvest regulations, redfish have made a comeback and are once again thriving in our coastal waters.

We call this method "grilling on the half shell," and it works well with any thick-skinned, heavy-scaled fish, making reds a perfect choice. To clean the fish, simply fillet it down both sides and leave the skin and scales attached. To cook, place the seasoned fish, skin side down, directly on the grill grate. The skin will get crisp and start to curl along the edge, holding in the meat and juices.

To serve, cut the fish into individual portions, leaving the skin attached. Diners can use their forks to flake the cooked fish away from the skin as they eat.

Start by melting the butter in a saucepan or small skillet. Once the butter starts to bubble, add the garlic. Don't overheat, or you will burn both the garlic and the butter. Sauté the garlic for 3 to 4 minutes or until soft.

Place the fish skin side down in a pan or on a platter. Season the fish lightly with salt and pepper. Pour the garlic butter evenly over both fillets. Spread the blackening seasoning evenly over the fish.

Heat your grill to about a medium heat, in the range of 250°F to 300°F. Place the fish, skin side down, directly on the grill rack.

Close the lid and let the fish cook for 10 to 20 minutes, depending on thickness. When the thickest part of the fillet flakes easily with a fork, the fish is done.

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MISCELLANEOUS CRITTERS

MENTION WILD GAME TO MOST PEOPLE, and they immediately think of the main game meats we've covered in previous chapters. But what if you want to get even wilder? This chapter deals with the wildest of the wild. Some of these are even a little dangerous. But one thing they all have in common? They taste great.

DEEP-FRIED SPICY RATTLESNAKE

INGREDIENTS

2–3 pounds of skinned rattlesnake, cross-cut into 3-inch sections

1 cup cornmeal

1 cup all-purpose flour

3 tablespoons Everglades Heat seasoning

Peanut oil for deep-frying

I’m not one for killing a rattlesnake just because of what it is. I tend to let them go about their business, knowing that if I don’t bother them, they won’t bother me. But not everyone feels that way, and occasionally I’ll get a call that a friend has permanently removed a rattlesnake from an area with kids, pets, or livestock. “Do you want it?” they ask. The answer is usually yes. Because rattlesnake is good eats in the States where taking them is legal.

Once you have your snake, the first thing to do is remove the head. Much like birds, snakes can still strike after death. Use an axe or sharp shovel to remove the head and then bury it so that no pets or children will find it. To skin, simply grasp the skin at the neck and then peel the length of the snake. Remove the entrails, and you are done.

Now that you have your rattlesnake skinned and prepped for the table, what should you do with it? The answer is just about any recipe that works with

frog legs, snapping turtle, or even chicken. But my favorite cooking method is also one of the easiest: deep-fried. There is something about deep-fried food that welcomes everyone to give it a try, even if it’s something they haven’t tried before. Like rattlesnake.

For the coating, we mix cornmeal, all-purpose flour, and one of my favorites, Everglades Heat, for a bit of spice. For some reason, I feel like rattlesnake is best with a little bite to it, and the Everglades Heat is the perfect blend of seasoning and spice. I sprinkle it in liberally and mix it into the flour and meal before coating the snake.



Heat the oil to 350°F. Mix the cornmeal, flour, and Everglades Heat in a large bowl. Toss the snake sections to coat evenly with the dredge. Gently lower the rattlesnake into the hot oil, a few pieces at a time, being careful not to overcrowd the pan.

Fry for 8 to 10 minutes, until the exterior is golden brown and crunchy and the thickest part reads 165°F internal temperature. Serve with ranch

dressing or your favorite dipping sauce. The best way to eat rattlesnake is to peel away the “backstraps” along either side of the backbone. These meaty sections will come off bone-free. After that, use your thumb or fingers to push the remaining meat down and away from the rib bones.

FRIED ALLIGATOR PO’ BOY

INGREDIENTS

Peanut oil for frying

2–3 loaves of good French bread, preferably from a bakery

2–3 pounds of gator meat, cut into 1-inch cubes

Freshly shredded or leaf lettuce

Sliced tomatoes

DREDGE FOR GATOR

1 cup all-purpose flour

1 cup fine yellow cornmeal

2 tablespoons Cajun seasoning

1 teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon salt

SPICY REMOULADE SAUCE

1 cup mayonnaise

¼ cup yellow or brown mustard

1 tablespoon dill pickle relish

2 teaspoons cayenne pepper

2 teaspoons Everglades

All-Purpose Seasoning

2 teaspoons prepared horseradish

1 large clove garlic, minced

We never miss a chance to stop in at Mineral Springs Seafood in Panacea, Florida, to visit when we are down that way. While you are there, pick up some alligator meat for this Fried Gator Po’ Boy, or some alligator sausage, or fresh seafood, or their smoked mullet and other dips. You can’t go wrong with anything they sell.

The secret to any good po’ boy is good bread, plenty of crispy fried meat, and a spicy sauce to top it all off. This one has all of those.

Heat a half-inch of peanut oil over medium-high heat. While the peanut oil heats, mix the remoulade sauce ingredients and stash it in the refrigerator.



Cut the French bread into sandwich-sized sections and slice. Toast lightly.

Mix the dredge ingredients well. Toss the gator chunks to coat well with the dredge mixture. Drop the gator, a piece at a time, into the hot oil. Fry the gator in batches so that you don’t overcrowd the pan. Cook for 3 to 4 minutes per side until the coating is crisp and golden brown and the meat is just cooked through.

Pile the fried gator high on the toasted bread. Top with shredded lettuce, a few tomato slices, and a liberal helping of spicy remoulade sauce.

CAJUN CRAWFISH BOIL

INGREDIENTS

6 gallons of water

½ cup of kosher salt

+/- 1.5 pounds of powdered crawfish boil spice (recipe to follow)

3 yellow onions halved

8 jalapeño peppers sliced about

½-inch thick with the seeds

6 lemons halved and squeezed into the water

2 new red potatoes per person

1½ ears of corn halved per person

5–7 pounds (or more) of live crawfish per person

JAGODA CRAWFISH BOIL SPICE

8 tablespoons black peppercorns, ground

4 tablespoons coriander seeds, ground

½ cup kosher salt

8 tablespoons cayenne pepper

5 tablespoons granulated garlic

¾ cup paprika

4 tablespoons onion powder

4 tablespoons dried thyme

4 tablespoons dried rosemary

8 crumbled bay leaves

CAJUN DIPPING SAUCE

1 cup mayo

½ cup ketchup

Juice of 2 lemons

¼ cup Louisiana hot sauce (or your favorite)

4 shakes of Worcestershire sauce

Dash of salt and black pepper

Dash of Cajun seasoning, if desired

Crawfish boils are best done on an outdoor burner in a stockpot of at least 40 quarts with a basket that just fits inside, along with a tight-fitting lid.

The correct way to eat a crawfish? Hold the head with one hand, the tail with the other. Give the tail a twist to remove it from the body. Suck the head (don’t argue, just do it; the head is the best part). Peel the tail and eat it as is or dip it into the Cajun dipping sauce.

Add water to the pot and toss in the salt, spice mix, onions, peppers, and lemons. Give everything a good stir and bring to a boil. Add the potatoes, stir, and let them simmer for 20 minutes. Next, add the corn and cook for an additional 10 minutes. Finally, add the crawfish, give everything a good stir, and turn the heat off. Cover the pot with a lid and let everything sit for an additional 15 minutes while the crawfish soak up the seasoning.



After the 15-minute soak, don a pair of work gloves and slowly lift the inner basket, allowing the liquid to slowly drain back into the pot. Once most of the cooking liquid has drained off, dump the basket on the paper-lined picnic table. Additional batches should be cooked in the same liquid as the first batch, and each pot will taste better than the last.



CAJUN ALLIGATOR MAQUE CHOUX

INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 pound alligator tail meat, cut into bite-sized pieces

2 tablespoons blackening seasoning blend

2 tablespoons butter

1 green bell pepper, diced

1 medium yellow onion, diced

1 clove garlic, minced

1 (24-ounce) bag frozen sweet corn

1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained

¾ cup heavy cream

2 teaspoons salt

1 tablespoon Cajun or Creole seasoning

1 teaspoon black pepper

Alligator season in the South is a special time of year. If you are lucky enough to draw a tag and connect with one of these prehistoric beasts, you will have lots of great meals to come.

If you do happen to find yourself with some gator meat, this maque choux recipe is the perfect way to serve it up. Traditionally a side dish, this sweet corn–based recipe elevates to a meal on its own with the addition of meat like gator, shrimp, or redfish.

Never heard of maque choux? It’s a classic Cajun dish featuring sweet corn, onion, bell peppers, and tomatoes. Since it cooks in one pan, it’s quick and easy to make, even on a busy weeknight. The dish’s origin isn’t clear, but most think it was a combination of Native American and Creole French cooking methods.

Buy your favorite premixed blackening seasoning at the local grocery store, or use your favorite homemade blend.

Add the oil to a large skillet over medium-high heat. Sprinkle the alligator tail meat with the blackening seasoning blend.

Sauté the gator for 5 to 7 minutes or until just cooked through. Move the gator to a warm plate.

Add the butter to the skillet. Sauté the peppers, onion, and garlic until soft (around 5 minutes).

Add the corn and tomatoes to the pan. Stir well. Reduce heat to medium and continue cooking another 5 minutes or until the corn is cooked through.

Return the alligator to the skillet and pour in the heavy cream. Add the salt, Cajun seasoning, and black pepper. Bring the mixture to a boil, and then turn down the heat to low and simmer the dish until the sauce thickens (another 5 minutes).

DEEP-FRIED SNAPPING TURTLE

INGREDIENTS

½ cup white vinegar

2 quarts of water

Meat from one dressed snapping turtle

Vegetable or peanut oil for deep-frying 1½ cups flour

½ cup cornmeal

2 tablespoons Cajun seasoning

1 egg

Turtle meat can be tough. There are a couple of ways to get around this issue when you fry it. The first involves frying the meat and then wrapping it in foil and placing it in a cooler or slow cooker to basically steam itself for an hour or two. The trouble with this method is that it makes the breading on the turtle meat soft and a bit mushy. The second option slow simmers the turtle pieces on the bone first, and then the meat gets deboned, dipped in egg wash, and rolled in flour and deep-fried. This method results in tender meat with a crispy, crunchy coating.

Start by adding the vinegar to 2 quarts of water in a heavy pot. Bring the mixture to a boil, add the turtle meat, and then reduce the heat to a simmer.

Place the lid on the pot and simmer the meat for 1 hour. Remove the turtle pieces from the pot and allow to cool.

Pick the meat away from the bone, preferably in bite-sized pieces. Heat the oil to 350°F in a heavy pot.

While the oil heats, mix the flour, cornmeal, and Cajun seasoning together in a shallow bowl. In a separate bowl, beat the egg with a couple tablespoons of water to make an egg wash.



Dip the pieces of turtle into the egg wash, and then toss in the flour mixture. Allow the pieces to rest for 5 minutes to set the coating on the meat. Once the oil comes to temperature, drop the meat into the pot, one at a time, being careful not to overcrowd the pot, and lower the oil temperature. Fry for 5 minutes until the crust is golden brown and the turtle floats to the top.

Remember that the turtle is already cooked through, and you just want to crisp the coating.

Move each batch of finished turtle to a paper-lined platter while you cook the next batch. Serve the turtle by itself or with your favorite dipping sauce.



DUTCH OVEN BEAVER ROAST

INGREDIENTS

1 beaver hindquarter and 2 beaver backstraps, cleaned (about 5 pounds of meat)

1 cup seasoned flour

1 pound each of cleaned carrots, onions, and potatoes

½ cup of vegetable oil

Salt and pepper

1 beer

You never know what sort of game meat might show up when our crew gathers for deer camp. But, regardless of origin, if the guys bring it to camp, we cook it. When Marty showed up with a cooler full of dressed beaver meat from his trapline, the wheels started to turn on possible cooking methods and recipes.

I figured a low-and-slow cooking process was in order, so I broke out the original slow cooker—my Lodge Dutch oven. We dusted the beaver in seasoned flour, browned it off in hot oil, and tossed in some carrots, potatoes, and onions for a traditional roast. To keep things from drying out over the long cook time, we added about half (or maybe a little more) of a good beer.

We fired up some charcoal briquettes in the grill and placed a few under and several on top of the Dutch oven. As the charcoal burned down a bit, we started some more and replenished the heat source roughly halfway through the 4-hour cook time.

So what does beaver taste like? It’s pretty dang good. If I had to pigeon-hole it into a category most would be familiar with, I would say it is similar to grass-fed beef. The creamy fat surrounding the hindquarter rendered down during the long cook and added quite a bit of flavor to the vegetables.

Dust the beaver in the seasoned flour. Set the meat aside to allow the flour to stick to the meat.

Peel the carrots and onions, quarter the onions, and halve or quarter the potatoes if you are using larger than fingerling size.

Heat the oil in the Dutch oven. I did this over the gas burner of our camp stove. Once the oil is hot, add the beaver meat. Allow to cook for 2 to 4 minutes, and then flip and continue cooking until all sides are golden brown.

Add the potatoes, carrots, and onions. Season well with salt and pepper. Remember that you are seasoning several pounds of food, so don’t skimp. I used around a tablespoon of each.

Pour over the beer and place the lid on the Dutch oven. I used seven coals under my 12-inch Lodge Dutch oven and then placed an even dozen on top. After a couple hours of cooking, I replenished the charcoal with fresh briquettes, using my kitchen tongs to slide the new coals under the oven.

Rain kept us from having a campfire, so we cooked under our kitchen shelter. If you have a fire going, simply rest the Dutch oven in a bed of coals raked to the side of the fire and top with a few more. Replenish as the coals burn down.

BEAVER AND SAUSAGE GUMBO

INGREDIENTS

1 boned-out beaver hindquarter, cut into 1-inch cubes, around 2½ pounds

Salt and pepper

¾ cup peanut or vegetable oil

1 cup seasoned flour

2 bell peppers, diced

2 stalks celery, diced

2 medium white onions, diced

1 pound of your favorite spicy smoked sausage, cut into ¾-inch slices

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 quarts water

1 quart chicken stock

2 tablespoons Realtree Cajun Seasoning

2 bay leaves

2 teaspoons filé gumbo powder (available in the spice section of your local grocery)

1 teaspoon tomato paste

I found myself with some leftover beaver hindquarter one winter day. I had spent the cool morning outside on a late-season squirrel hunt. As I thought about what to do with the boned-out beaver, my cold bones told me it was a good day for gumbo.

I like a little spice to my gumbo, so I use a good hot smoked sausage and toss in some Realtree Cajun Seasoning. If you want it even hotter, add a few dashes of your favorite hot sauce. I leave the sauce out of the gumbo and serve it on the table for anyone who wishes to add it. To make the gumbo a meal, serve it over a scoop of white rice and add a hunk of crusty French bread to sop up the broth.

Start by cutting the boned-out beaver meat into small chunks and seasoning it well with salt and pepper. Heat the oil over medium-high heat. Brown the beaver meat in batches, stirring and flipping until all sides are deep golden brown and slightly crisp.



Move the browned meat to a warm platter and add the flour to the oil. Stir to coat the grains of the flour in oil. Reduce the heat to medium and keep stirring. The flour will quickly go from white to toasted-almond color. Keep stirring. As the roux darkens, the texture will change, going from grainy to smooth. When the roux is slightly darker than smooth peanut butter (15 to 20 minutes), add the diced vegetables. Stir to coat everything well with the browned roux. Continue cooking, stirring constantly, until the vegetables begin to soften. Return the browned beaver meat to the pot. Add the sausage and garlic. Stir well.

Pour in water and chicken stock. Add the Cajun seasoning, bay leaves, filé gumbo powder, and tomato paste. Turn the heat up and bring the gumbo to a simmer. Reduce heat, cover the pot, and simmer for at least 2 hours.

To serve, spoon some cooked white rice into a bowl and ladle over the gumbo. Eat it with a chunk of crusty French bread to sop up the juice.

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- Creamy Hungarian Turkey Leg and Mushroom Soup

- Slow Cooker Wild Turkey Stock
- Venison Zuppa Toscana Soup
- Wild Turkey Leg Italian Wedding Soup

Sous Vide Herbed Turkey Breast

soy sauce
- Brine-Cured Smoked Bear Ham
- Char Siu Rabbit
- Crispy Sesame Sticky Squirrel Wings
- Dove Kebabs
- Dr Pepper and Soy Marinated Duck Breast
- Duck Breast and Blackberry Stir-Fry
- Frozen Orange Juice Duck Stir-Fry
- Ground Elk Dan Dan Noodles
- Hawaiian Grilled Squirrel
- Honey Garlic Grilled Duck Breast
- Hot-and-Spicy Grilled Turkey Hearts on Avocado Toast
- Mallard Duck Yakisoba
- Stir-Fried Spicy Wild Pork
- Teriyaki Venison Backstrap Skewers

spice rubs
- Classic Roasted Wild Pork
- Elk Roast with Duck Fat Yorkshire Puddings and Gravy
- Hawaiian Wild Pork Ribs
- Mediterranean Grilled Elk Backstrap

Spicy Buttermilk-Fried Goose Breast Sandwich

spinach
- Mushroom and Spinach Stuffed Grilled Wild Turkey Breast
- Wild Turkey Leg Italian Wedding Soup

squirrel
- Cajun Squirrel Dirty Rice
- Crispy Sesame Sticky Squirrel Wings
- Hawaiian Grilled Squirrel
- Squirrel Country Captain
- Tender Braised BBQ Squirrel

Squirrel Country Captain

stew
- Muley Caldillo (Mexican-Style Mule Deer Stew)

Sticky Pineapple Turkey Tenderloins

Stir-Fried Elk Pepper Steak

Stir-Fried Spicy Wild Pork

sweet potatoes
- Grilled Wild Pork with Bourbon Cherry Sauce

Tender Braised BBQ Squirrel

teriyaki sauce
- Hawaiian Grilled Squirrel
- Teriyaki Venison Backstrap Skewers
- Teriyaki Wild Turkey and Bacon Kebabs
- Turkey Heart Yakitori

Teriyaki Venison Backstrap Skewers

Teriyaki Wild Turkey and Bacon Kebabs
Thanksgiving Stuffed Wild Turkey Roll
tomatoes
  Cajun Alligator Maque Choux
  Muley Caldillo (Mexican-Style Mule Deer Stew)
trichinosis
turkey, wild
  Cajun Turkey with Fried Biscuits and Chili Honey
  Cider-Brined Wild Turkey Breast
  Creamy Hungarian Turkey Leg and Mushroom Soup
Deep-Fried Wild Turkey Breast
Extra-Crispy Restaurant-Style Wild Turkey Fingers
Fried Wild Turkey Gizzards with Bacon, Onions, and Mushrooms
Garlic Lovers' Fried Wild Turkey Gizzards
Hot-and-Spicy Grilled Turkey Hearts on Avocado Toast
Hot Honey-Drizzled Wild Turkey Biscuits
Mimosa-Marinated Fried Turkey Biscuits
Mushroom and Spinach Stuffed Grilled Wild Turkey Breast
Slow Cooker Turkey and Dumplings
Slow Cooker Turkey Leg and Noodle Soup
Slow Cooker Wild Turkey Stock
Smoked BBQ Wild Turkey Breast
Sous Vide Herbed Turkey Breast
Sticky Pineapple Turkey Tenderloins
Teriyaki Wild Turkey and Bacon Kebabs
Thanksgiving Stuffed Wild Turkey Roll
Turkey Heart-Stuffed Jalapeño Peppers
Turkey Heart Yakitori
Wild Turkey Leg Italian Wedding Soup
Wild Turkey Piccata
Wild Turkey with Mushrooms and Balsamic Vinegar Sauce
Turkey Heart-Stuffed Jalapeño Peppers
Turkey Heart Yakitori

upland game
Upside-Down Deep-Dish Cast-Iron Venison Pizza

venison
  Air Fryer Venison Meatballs
  Argentina-Style Grilled Moose Steaks with Chimichurri Sauce
  Backstrap with Smoked Cream Cheese and Bacon Jam Appetizers
  Bourbon Brown Sugar Smoked Venison Sandwich
  Bourbon Honey Glazed Venison Steak Tips
  Date-Night Venison Tenderloin with Red Wine Pan Sauce
  Dr Pepper Marinated Venison Backstrap
  Elk Roast with Duck Fat Yorkshire Puddings and Gravy
  Garlic-Butter Backstrap and Mushrooms
  Grilled Backstrap with Bourbon Garlic Cream Sauce
  Grilled Venison Backstrap Italian Sub
  Grilled Venison Barbecue Shotgun Shells
  Ground Elk Dan Dan Noodles

- Herbed Garlic Butter Grilled Backstrap
- Loaded Venison Taco Baked Potato
- Maple-Glazed Venison Backstrap and Cornbread Dressing
- Mediterranean Grilled Elk Backstrap
- Muley Caldillo (Mexican-Style Mule Deer Stew)
- Oyster Mushroom and Venison Stir-Fry
- Parmesan-Crusted Venison Backstrap Medallions
- Personal Venison Backstrap Wellingtons
- Reverse-Seared Smoked Backstrap
- Stir-Fried Elk Pepper Steak
- Teriyaki Venison Backstrap Skewers
- Upside-Down Deep-Dish Cast-Iron Venison Pizza
- Venison Crunchy Taco Cup Appetizers
- Venison Nacho Sausage Balls
- Venison Steak and Blue Cheese Alfredo
- Venison Zuppa Toscana Soup

Venison Crunchy Taco Cup Appetizers
Venison Nacho Sausage Balls
Venison Steak and Blue Cheese Alfredo
Venison Zuppa Toscana Soup

vinegar
- Bourbon Honey Glazed Venison Steak Tips
- Carolina-Style Vinegar-Marinated Fried Quail
- Deep-Fried Snapping Turtle
- Grilled Wild Pork with Bourbon Cherry Sauce
- Herbed Garlic Butter Grilled Backstrap
- Wild Turkey with Mushrooms and Balsamic Vinegar Sauce

water chestnuts
- Duck Breast and Blackberry Stir-Fry
- Mallard Duck Yakisoba

waterfowl
- Dr Pepper and Soy Marinated Duck Breast
- Duck Breast and Blackberry Stir-Fry
- Frozen Orange Juice Duck Stir-Fry
- Honey Garlic Grilled Duck Breast
- Mallard Duck Yakisoba
- Pan-Seared Duck Breast with Blackberry Wine Sauce
- Pan-Seared Mallard Breast with Bourbon Plum Sauce
- Spicy Buttermilk-Fried Goose Breast Sandwich

Wild Turkey Leg Italian Wedding Soup
Wild Turkey Piccata
Wild Turkey with Mushrooms and Balsamic Vinegar Sauce

yakisoba sauce
- Mallard Duck Yakisoba

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