



***GUIDE TO HANDLING AND COOKING***  
***WILD GAME, FISH***  
***AND EDIBLE PLANTS***

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Published by Philip A. Rice

Chino Valley, Arizona

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ISBN 978-0-578-04804-8

Printed in USA by Philip A. Rice

## FORWARD

This book is written mainly as a cookbook but as many of you are aware, there is more to cooking wild game and fish than just frying, baking or broiling. A lot of the taste depends on what is done with the wildlife from the moment it is shot until it reaches its place of cooking.

Because some of the wild game is handled by the hunter and fisherman who have never been trained or taught how to handle the meat or fish after it has been acquired, the first part of this book is dedicated to the handling procedures for wild game.

Many people have said after trying wild game that they do not care for the wild taste. Someone not liking a particular meat is possibly due to the way it was handled after it was taken. Those people who say they do not like the wild game and will not try it again are missing out on some of the finest eating.

I hope this book can not only help one with caring for game, but also give one many hours of fine eating pleasures.

## TREATMENT AND HANDLING OF WILD GAME

A lot of the quality and taste of wild game depends on how it was handled from the time it was killed until it reaches the point to where it will be cooked. Wild game is not worth cooking unless it reaches the stove in good cooking condition.

Wild game is at its best when it is dressed as soon as it is killed, the cooked while fresh for small game or after aging for large game or promptly refrigerated or frozen for later use.

Sometimes this is not possible or convenient and the second best way is to draw and bleed the game while it is still warm. Then the wild game should be cooled down quickly as possible and kept clean and cool until dressing can be finished.

## LARGE GAME

(DEER, ELK, ANTELOPE, ETC)

Draw as soon as shot, which starts the blood removal and cooling process. Next wipe out the body cavity with a clean cloth and begin the cooling process immediately by propping the body cavity open to get the air circulating inside the body cavity. Do not use water to wash out the body cavity unless the body cavity has been contaminated with the intestines. Cut out the scent glands immediately.

Next hang the game in the shade to cool so that the air is circulating around the entire body cavity. Make sure to keep flies and other insects off the meat by wrapping in cheesecloth. Hanging is done by the head or by the hind feet. I prefer hanging by the hind feet to drain the blood from the hindquarters towards the head, which will be discarded. The hindquarters contain the largest amount and best cuts of the meat and hanging by the hindquarters helps preserve the quality of more of the useable meat.

Next is the aging process. Aging greatly improves the quality and flavor of venison. Aging should be anywhere from five to six days for a young deer to upwards of two to three weeks for large deer or elk.

The ideal temperature during this period is 34 to 36 degrees.

When transporting wild game after cooling do not lay the game across a car in warm or wet weather and always keep it away from heated parts of a vehicle like the hood.

When skinning the animal make sure to keep the hair side of the skin away from the meat.

## SMALL GAME

(Rabbit, Squirrel, Dove, Quail, etc)

Once shooting small game it is advised to remove those things that spoil most quickly: blood and internal organs. These are often what cause the unpleasant tastes in small game.

The warmer the weather and the more shot up small game is the faster it will spoil so cleaning and cooling quickly is important. It does not take much time to draw small game and it will not drastically interrupt your hunting. One can leave the feathers or skin on for transporting and clean as soon as you get home.

When transporting small game keep it cool. If the weather is warm you should carry an ice chest along with ice to keep your game cool. However, keep the game from direct contact with the ice and keep it out of water. Small game should be kept dry.

## FISH

All fish should be kept alive until they are cleaned, as dead fish spoil very quickly especially in warm weather. Fish that die before being cleaned or dressed can become very strong and the quality of their meat deteriorates very rapidly, and contrary to popular belief, keeping the dead fish in the water does not keep them firm and fresh.

There are a couple of things one can do to keep their fish alive longer. Fish will stay live longer if placed on a stringer through their lip rather than through their gills. Also, when using a boat lift the fish out of the water before moving or traveling with the boat. Water forced through the gills can drown the fish. When taking the fish out of the water to move the boat keep them moist and out of the sun and return them to the water as soon as stopping.

One way to prevent losing fish is to kill them and remove the intestines and gills while waiting on the next fish to bite, and wrap them in wet burlap or place them in an ice chest. Be sure to keep the fish directly off the ice or at least out of the melted ice as water will tend to make the fish watery and mushy.



Removal of the scales or skinning can be done later at a more convenient time.

Remember scaled fish will tend to be moister but stronger tasting whereas skinned fish will be drier and have less fish taste.

As far as the meat texture of the fish it should be noted the colder the water the fish is caught in the firmer the meat will be and the warmer the water the more mushy the meat will be. Also fish caught in fast running rivers or streams will tend to be firmer than fish caught in still waters as in lakes or ponds or slow moving rivers and streams.

## RATTLESNAKE

Rattlesnake meat is actually very good. Some think it tastes a little like chicken and others think it tastes a little like fish but it does have a taste of its own. Be careful handling rattlesnake even if it is dead.

Always cut the head off first! After cutting off the head lay it out flat on its back and nail it down to a board where its head was removed. With a very sharp knife or razor knife cut down the belly. Peel the skin away from the meat (sometimes pliers are helpful). Remove the internal organs and soak in salt water for two to three hours. Remove from the water and pat dry. Cook, refrigerate, or freeze for later use.

If one wishes to save the skin use a razor knife and make sure when cutting the skin along the belly make sure the cut is down the very center of the belly making as straight a cut as possible.

If one wishes to save the skin the following is information may be useful.

Place the flesh side of the skin facing up on a board and tack down while stretching the skin taught.

The tacks should be placed on the very outside edge of the skin and about every two inches all the way

around the skin stretching the skin as you go. When this has been done cover the skin completely with a liberal amount of salt. Set out in the sun for at least 3 days but make sure to keep the skin dry.

The salt helps dry the skin by drawing out any fatty tissue from the skin and thereby at the same time eliminating any order that could arise because of decaying tissue.

Once the skin is dry gently remove the salt, and remove the tacks carefully. One may then soften the brittle skin by gently working neat's-foot oil into the skin.

## BULLFROGS

Frog legs are considered by many as a delicacy. They have firm meat which when fried is very good. Most people save only the hind legs but a lot of meat is wasted especially on large bullfrogs. For this reason two methods of cleaning will be outlined.

First, to keep from wasting meat cut the skin around the head and peel the skin down the body to the feet. Then cut off the feet removing the skin. Remove the head and cut down the stomach and remove the intestines. Pull out the nerves in the front and hind legs and cook, refrigerate or freeze.

If you prefer to use only the hind legs cut the skin around the hind legs just above the thigh and peel the skin down the leg. Cut off the feet and remove the skin. Cut the legs from the frog and remove the nerves from the legs.

The reason for removing the nerves is to keep the legs from jumping or jerking when placed into hot oil when frying.

## CRAWDADS

Crawdads or crayfish as some people prefer to call them should be kept alive until ready to clean. Dead crawdads spoil very quickly and one should never clean or cook a dead crawdad. After cleaning they should be used promptly or frozen for later use.

There are two main methods of cleaning crawdads in preparation of cooking. First, the whole live crawdads can be dumped into a strong salt-water solution. This induces regurgitation and causes them to clean themselves. They may then be boiled whole. Once cooked the tail is broken off and the thread like intestine is pulled out.

The second method is to break off the tail, peel off the shell and pull out the threadlike intestine. You then cook or freeze them.

## HELPFUL COOKING TIPS

The following recipes are not necessarily meant to be followed exactly. Cooking times may vary depending on the doneness one prefers or possibly a larger or smaller cut of meat. By the same token ones taste may be different on the seasoning. One may desire more or less of the seasoning or may even desire to use one's own special seasoning, like my own special blend of seasoning my kids call Dad's Special Seasoning and the hundreds of others who have tried and now use my seasoning call it Phil's Special Seasoning. I now have to ship it all across the United States.

If one is new at cooking wild game the following recipes should be helpful in creating a delicious dish.

A few helpful hints on cooking wild game should be included here.

1. For fatty game the cooking temperatures should be raised by 20-30 degrees.
2. Moist cooking (stewing, pot roasting, covered roasting, crock pot cooking, etc.) is best for older, tough or very lean game.
3. Dry heat cooking (frying, grilling, uncovered roasting, etc.) is best used for young or fatty game.

4. If the game to be cooked is not completely thawed out, start slow using low heat to let the middle thaw out before cooking the outside too much.

5. Wild game taste can be partially eliminated by soaking the game in mild salt water or vinegar water (vinegar also helps tenderize) or by par boiling prior to using your favorite recipe.

Another way to help reduce the wild game taste is to **remove as much of the fat as possible prior to cooking** the venison as the fat usually contains a stronger game taste.

6. When recipes call for roasts and cooking times given, they are approximate. A round boneless roast will take more time than a flat bone-in roast. By the same token there will be more meat in a round or thick boneless roast than in a flatter bone-in roast. Adjustments to the recipes can be made for smaller or larger number of servings.

7. When referring to the number of servings a recipe provides it is only a guess as it depends on appetites. A family of 6 with 4 small kids is going to eat a lot less than a family of 6 with four teenagers, or six 200-pound construction workers. After cooking for a while, one will get a feel for how much to cook for a particular group of people.

8. In many of the recipes, especially under venison, the recipes can use ground venison or shredded or cut up venison. If one has left over venison from a roast, go ahead and shred or cut up the leftovers and freeze in one-pound packages and place in the freezer. That way it can be used in a future recipe without having to spend all the time cooking a roast to shred or chop up for the next meal. One just has to pull out one or two packages, thaw and use for the recipe. By the same token maybe a recipe calls for 2 pounds of cooked venison and you only have a 5-pound roast. Go ahead and cook the roast and freeze what you don't need for a future meal.

If one uses venison in a lot of meal and if one is cooking a roast to use for a recipe go ahead and cook two roasts as it does not take any longer to cook 2 roasts at the same time as it does one. Package the extra venison in one pound packages and freeze so all one has to do is pull the venison one needs out of the freezer and thaw and it is ready to use in the recipe. This makes quick meals, as the time in most recipes is the actual cooking of the venison prior to being able to use it in the recipe. This makes cooking a meal quick and easy.

*For those who may not have wild game or just do not like wild game all the recipes in this book, especially venison, can be used with beef and pork.*



9. When a recipe uses several spices mix the all together in an old shaker bottle and then apply to the meat and that way the seasonings are applied in an even manner. For recipes that contain a liquid or sauces (stews, soups, chili, spaghetti) just add the seasonings to the pot and mix.

10. When following a recipe, the seasonings are a starting point. Don't take the recipe seasoning as gospel. Taste the food and add more or less of a seasoning to fit your taste or try experimenting with other spices you may like. For instance some people like curry but I don't so none of the recipes in this book have curry. If you are a curry person try adding curry to some of the recipes.

11. When it comes to venison, if you have a favorite beef recipe at home try using it with venison. If the game has a strong game taste (any game, not just venison), recipes with sauces, soups and gravies help mask the game taste by adding other flavors. Another option is to use ½ venison and ½ beef in a recipe. Another option is to parboil the game prior to using in a recipe, discard the water the meat was cooked in and then use the game in a recipe. Parboiling helps remove some of the game taste by cooking out the fat, which contains a lot of the game taste.

## Smoking Wild Game Meat

Just about everyone who smokes have their own opinions or ideas on how to properly smoke meat, and of course I am no different. I have learned a few tricks over the years, which I will pass along here but there are many other methods that work just as well.

The biggest problem for beginning smokers is to understand the process and how smoking works and as long as one understands and follows the basic principles of smoking they can experiment on their own.

The meat:

One thing about meat from wild game is unless it is commercially farm raised and processed it has not been government inspected like commercially processed meats such as beef, pork, chicken, etc. we take for granted when we buy meat at the grocer. By the same token whether one considers it good or bad, wild game unlike our commercially processed meats has never been vaccinated. Of course you can look at the other side in that it has never been injected with steroids or other growth hormones either.

Therefore one should take certain precautions when cooking. The important thing to remember is to always make sure the internal temperature of the meat you're smoking (and this should be with any meat, even domestically produced meats from your grocer) is heated up to a safe temperature to make sure any bacteria is killed in the cooking/curing process. This temperature will depend on the type and cut of meat but if one wants to be sure; as long as the internal temperature of the meat reaches 180 degrees the meat will be safe.

Wild game is probably as safe as domestic meats for the most part but there is always that little extra potential for disease that vaccinated animals do not have and cooking wild game to a safe temperature eliminates that concern. After all millions of people eat wild game every day and they do not get ill.

When smoking there is another reason for smoking the meat until the internal temperature reaches 180 degrees. Whether meat is from the grocer or is wild game, meat contains muscle fibers and connective tissue referred to as collagen. Cheaper cuts of meat as well as wild game have a tendency to be tough because of this. It is also the collagen that can help contribute to meat and wild game being “tough and chewy” when not properly cooked.

Heat breaks down collagen. Collagen in meat begins to break down around 180 degrees into a liquid gelatin form. By raising the internal temperature of the meat to 180 degrees during smoking (or any other means of cooking for that manner) one starts to break down the collagen. It takes holding the meat at this temperature for about an hour to totally break the collagen down. Once you've broken down the collagen you will have fork tender meat as long as the meat retained its moisture. That is the next topic.

Working muscles (shoulders, ribs and legs) benefit most from long slow cooking methods like smoking.

Now that one knows potential safety issues with undercooked wild game and the process how meat breaks down when cooking let's talk about smoking.

There are two basic items to control when smoking meat: maintaining a low cooking temperature and at the same time maximizing moisture retention in the meat...

I try to keep my cooking temperature between 200°F - 225°F. The goal in smoking is to slowly raise the internal temperature of the meat to 180°F and then hold it there for about an hour. "Slow and low" is the rule of thumb. Cooking time will be about 1.5 – 2 hours per pound of meat, but can vary based on