

by Gerhard R. Damm

## **A Matter of Taste - Wild game meat, the consumption thereof, is important in Germany—and should be worldwide.**



*In Germany, locally harvested wild game meat, whether prepared in home kitchens or by a Michelin Star chef, provides not only health benefits but also great flavor.*

On average, 400 grams—not quite nine-tenths of a pound—is about how much wild game meat every German eats each year. That's not much at all, especially when we consider that some 300,000 German hunters eat about one-third of each wild animal they harvest annually. And it's downright negligible compared to the 60 kilos (135 lbs) of lamb, beef, pork, chicken and so forth that end up on German plates every year.

In truth, every gram of venison should be considered a feast, because nature does not provide a more generous, healthier and tastier gift than locally sourced wild meat.

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Hunting is as old as humanity. It has been practiced for at least 600,000 years and features prominently in the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira, in France and Spain. However, hunting became reserved for the privileged classes as soon as hierarchical societies emerged. The patricians of Rome ate peacock and flamingo, Charlemagne claimed the free forests of Europe as his personal game reserves, Francois I built Chambord, the largest chateau in the Loire Valley, as a hunting lodge, English aristocrats bankrupted themselves with shooting estates . . . For centuries, the common people were forced to help their “betters” carry out opulent driven hunts, but when it came to game for their own tables, they had to resort to poaching (which often carried the death penalty).

The French Revolution began to put an end to the privileges of the nobility, but to this day hunting, and thus meat from wild game, remains an exclusive pleasure throughout most of Europe.

During Germany’s 2018-19 season, hunting provided about 27,000 tons of game meat. This was supplemented with 20,000 tons of imported “wild” meat. But most of this imported meat comes from intensive breeding facilities where animals are raised on concentrated feed; once slaughtered, the meat of these animals is frozen before it starts its trek to German supermarkets. Thus no self-respecting hunter in Germany refers to this as wild or game meat and it is sold under the generic designation “venison.”

True German wild game meat is harvested in season in local hunting areas. After it has been aged appropriately and prepared, whether by traditional methods or innovative modern chefs, it lands promptly on the gourmet’s table.

Yet in Germany, as in so many other countries, many consumers no longer accept the dictates of regionality and seasonality. They fall for the aggressive propaganda of the global food industry, which assures us that everything is always available and in unlimited quantities. Naturally, however, the availability of wild meat from the forests depends upon the calendar—the open season—and there’s never a guarantee that a hunt will be successful.

This leads to the absurd fact that many Germans prefer to buy frozen pseudo-game from New Zealand deer farms—at high prices, but all year round—instead of looking for red and roe deer taken in season nearby. To make matters worse, German consumers have so little regard for wild boar that this highly palatable meat often sells for less than industrial pork. (And all of Europe, including Germany, is being overrun by wild boar.)

A recent survey by the DJV, the *Deutscher Jagdverband* or German Hunting Association, found that 84% of Germans appreciate the quality of wild game meat and every other German consumed at least some venison during the previous 12 months. It also established that the majority of Germans eat wild game in restaurants—chiefly because they believe that game is more difficult to prepare than other types of meat. As right as they are about the quality, they are equally wrong about the difficulty of preparation.

Wild game is the most natural meat on earth—free-ranging animals feed on nothing that is not in nature. Their meat is free from antibiotics and hormones, low in fat and cholesterol but richer in phosphorus, iron, potassium, magnesium, omega-3 fatty acids and vitamins B1 and B2.

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Furthermore, it is as easy to prepare in the kitchen as beef or pork. The notorious *haut gout*—the gaminess exemplified by a sharp, strong taste and odor—has become a distant memory, thanks to proper treatment of the meat in its journey from field to fork. No longer does wild meat need to be pickled or marinated in order to disguise any shortcomings.

However, many consumers are no longer able to identify game meat that has been processed properly. This is why it is important to find a reliable butcher who specializes in game—or, even better, a skilled hunter from whom to obtain the meat. Animals harvested in the field should be eviscerated and cooled immediately after the kill and then aged at the proper temperature for a few days. This ensures that the meat is tender and flavorful.

Fresh is better, of course. Ideally, wild game meat should not be frozen. (If it was frozen, you can tell because the bones go black when defrosted.) Freezing creates sharp ice crystals that damage the tissue and allow the natural juices to escape in the pan, draining away the exciting wild aromas and the subtle expressions of the environment that the animal lived in.

Wild game meat is a reflection of its habitat, just as a Riesling or a Cabernet Sauvignon is a product of the *terroir* the grapes grew in. Chamois meat has the most intense taste, thanks to the spicy herbs of the high mountains. At the other end of the scale, the moose—belying its massive bulk—is a sensitive gourmet that eats only the youngest and most tender herbs and shoots, and thus provides some the mildest-tasting game meat. (In Europe, anyway; I can't speak for North American moose.)

Autumn and early winter are the best seasons for wild game, when mushrooms, nuts, acorns and fruits are ripe and lend their own unique flavors to the meat of the animals that feed on them.

Many restaurants in Germany and across Europe—small and large, starred or family-operated—offer wild game dishes. The proprietors, particularly of the smaller restaurants, are often passionate hunters who take great pride in supplying their own kitchens with top-quality wild game from their own hunting areas.

Star chef Harald Rüssel, from Rüssel's Landhaus—a refugium for good taste housed in an old mill in a tranquil side valley of the Middle Moselle—is one of the most ardent hunters among Germany's top chefs. Rüssel prepares *Rehnüsschen mit Kräuterkruste*, a delicate cut from the inner and outer fillets of roe deer under a crust of herbs, like this:

Beat soft butter to a froth, stir in egg yolks, freshly ground pepper, thyme, rosemary, parsley, garlic, citrus zest; allow to the mixture to sit. Season with salt and pepper, shape into a roll and wrap in cling film. Sear the salted and peppered meat in a cast-iron pan and finish in the oven for a quarter of an hour. Set aside to rest. Finish the meat in hot butter for two minutes, cover with thin slices of the crust mixture, quickly gratinate under the grill at 180 degrees and serve.

Last year, to “nurture human health and support environmental sustainability,” the EAT-Lancet Commission, an international group of scientists, recommended a 50% reduction in the global consumption of red meat by 2050. Replacing industrially produced meat from livestock with naturally

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sourced wild game meat can be a significant part of this.

*Gerhard R. Damm is the editor-in-chief of Conservation Frontlines. After an article by Jakob Strobel y Serra, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.*

*Banner Image: Red deer stag. Jean-Luc Jorion photo*