

Beer and Wine with Venison

Talking about pairing wines with food always seems to conjure up images of snooty sommeliers in tuxedos telling me what I can and cannot drink with my dinner. Too often there's a holier-than-thou element to discussions of wine pairings—and even beer pairings—when you broach the topic with food professionals. It need not be so.

Remember, the Prime Directive in all pairings is to *drink what you like*. Period. End of story. If you love drinking Pabst with your backstrap, go for it. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. That said, certain pairings really can make both the food and the drink taste better.

Part of this pairing stuff is voodoo, admittedly, but there is some method to the madness of matching wine and beer with food. You all know the simplest one: red wines with red meat, white wines with white meat, right? Well, usually, but not always. Fried food with Champagne is a great example: They work great together. Another good rule is the hotter the weather, the lighter the beer. Budweiser or Labatt's at a backyard barbecue? Yes, please. But I'd rather have something more substantial in winter while eating a venison carbonnade.

Next thing to remember: There is no one true venison wine or beer. Yes, most wine drinkers agree that cabernet sauvignon, Italian Barolos or Barbarescos, Spanish Rioja, or French Cotes du Rhône blends are the best overall wines to drink with venison. But that doesn't mean an easier-drinking zinfandel won't be good—if, say, you're barbecuing venison in summertime.

I often hear skepticism when I talk about beer pairings, but beers are in many ways far more varied than wines. After all, even professionals confuse wine varieties with some frequency. But I can pretty much guarantee that you'll never confuse an imperial pale ale with a Scottish ale. As much as I love the good ole' American and Canadian macro-brews we've been drinking for decades, there are now legions of fantastic local beers to be had in every corner of the country, and more and more people are drinking beer with their meals in both the United States and Canada. Other than the tip about lighter beers for hot weather, here are a few others:

- Malty beers (German bocks, Scottish ales, brown ales, porters, and stouts) with heavier dishes, like stews and roasts. Always great in cold weather.
- Hoppy beers (IPAs, pale ales) with spicy foods like venison curry or fried rice.
- More carbonation with fattier foods; for example, pilsner or lager with chicken-fried venison. These are your hot weather beers. German weiss beer (white wheat beer) is great here, too.
- If I could choose just one style of beer for venison, however, it would be a pale ale. You want a bit of hoppy bitterness to balance the richness of the meat, but not so much that it blows it away like a serious IPA would.

There are a few beer styles you might not want to bring to the dinner table. For example, barley wines and imperial stouts, which are too strong and syrupy for food; most double or triple IPAs, unless you are a major hop-head and the food is *really* spicy; weird fruit beers, such as lambic, which are just hard to match with any food.

Wines and venison are a natural match. Here are a few good guidelines:

- Go for a full-bodied red, such as cabernet sauvignon, from Bordeaux or California, a good French Cotes du Rhône, an Italian Barolo or Barbaresco, or a Spanish Rioja.
- If you want to drink zinfandel with your venison, be sure it is a drier style, such as one from Italy, or California's Alexander Valley or Amador County. Avoid most Lodi zins, as they tend to be syrupy.
- In summer, a dry rosé is a good idea, as are some whites: Try a viognier or a roussanne from California, especially with grilled venison or tacos.
- In winter, go even darker. I like mourvèdre or a petit verdot with heavy braises and stews. But my all-time go-to wine for venison is a French Châteauneuf-du-Pape. There's just something about it that works with lots of different dishes.



Meat Temperature Chart

Many people have an intuitive notion of when meat is rare, medium, or well-done. But if you are using a thermometer, here are some temperature readings to help you make those determinations. Keep in mind that these temperatures are measured at the center of a piece of meat *after* resting.

Rare: 125°F	Medium-rare: 130°F
Medium: 140°F	Medium-well: 150°F
Well-done: 160°F	

your thumb. With your left hand, touch the fleshy part of your right thumb once more: This is medium.

One more finger back (to the ring finger on your right hand) and you get to medium-well. Not so good for any red meat. Finally, touch your pinky to your thumb and feel the base. Rock hard, right? That's well-done, which means you just made cat food from your venison steak, although I am reasonably certain even the cat won't eat it.

Remember, once the meat is resting, carryover heat will continue to cook it. So I always take meat off the heat a little before it is where I want it, which is on the rare side of medium. Once it has finished resting, the meat is perfectly cooked.

TO REST OR NOT?

It is conventional wisdom that after you cook meats, you let them rest a bit on a cutting board before you serve. And in general, this is a good idea, as it can help many kinds of meat retain a bit more moisture.

But not always. First of all, you should know that some water loss is inevitable; it's part of how meat cooks. You will lose moisture no matter what you do, mostly through evaporation in the oven and while the meat is resting. And you will lose more moisture by tenting meat with foil than by leaving it uncovered, which sounds odd. But think about it: Tenting meat stays hotter and cooks longer while it's resting, steaming more, which equals more water loss. Ever look at the underside of your foil? Coated with condensation from your meat.

Interestingly, in steaks that are cooked rare, the final meat temperature of 125°F or thereabouts is barely high enough to cook the connective tissue or collagen in the meat. This means that the utility of the resting step is limited. If you or your butcher have done the job right, there should be no connective tissue in your venison backstrap at all (yet another reason why the infamous "leg steak" is an abomination; see page 30). In practice, this means *you need not rest a venison steak that's been cooked rare*. Medium is another story, since the 140°F temperature of medium-cooked meat is hot enough to affect the collagen within the meat—again, *if* there's any in your steak.

What advantage do you gain by *not* resting a rare steak? The "bark"—the crispy crust on the exterior of the meat—will stay crispy and bacon-y. If you rest it, that bark will soften.

MARINATED VENISON KEBABS

Serves 4 | Prep Time: 24 hours, almost all of it marinating time in the fridge | Cook Time: 15 minutes

Kebabs are perhaps the best summertime preparation for meat from the hind legs of the deer. And after all, who doesn't love to eat a good kebab? There is a certain jazz-like quality to them: You can vary the veggies to suit your preference, and you can marinate the kebabs in anything from a vivid green herb sauce to Italian dressing to teriyaki. Or try this marinade, which is a mixture of red wine vinegar and harissa, which is to North Africa what ketchup is to North America.

Harissa is a condiment whose main flavors are chiles and caraway. And while it's supposed to be spicy, it's not supposed to be blow-your-head-off spicy. You'll note in my recipe below most of the chiles are milder varieties like poblano, pasilla, and ancho. If you are not into hot food, go easy on the really hot ones like the cascabels or Aleppo. You can buy harissa in places like Cost Plus World Market or Whole Foods, too.

I like to serve these kebabs with something simple, like grilled potatoes or bread, or, if I'm feeling like a low-carb day, coleslaw.

HARISSA

8 dried guajillo, ancho, pasilla, or New Mexican chiles

4 to 8 dried hot chiles, Aleppo if you can get them

1 teaspoon caraway seeds

½ teaspoon coriander seeds

½ teaspoon cumin seeds

1 teaspoon dried mint

¼ cup olive oil

2 teaspoons kosher salt

4 to 6 garlic cloves, mashed and minced

Lemon juice

If you're making your own harissa, start by removing the stems and seeds from the dried chiles. Tear the chiles into pieces and pour enough hot water over them to just barely cover. Weigh the chiles down with a small plate or something similar and let the chiles soak for an hour or two, until they're soft.

Once the chiles are soft, put them and the remaining ingredients into a blender or food processor and process into a paste—it can be smooth or rough, depending on how you like it. You might need a little bit of the soaking water to loosen things up. You can make the harissa days or even weeks in advance and store it in the refrigerator; it lasts for months that way.

To marinate the venison, mix the harissa and the red wine vinegar into a slurry in a bowl. Massage the marinade into the venison and pour the whole shebang into a lidded container. Refrigerate for at least a few hours, and as long as 2 days.

KEBABS

2 pounds venison, trimmed of sinew and cut into 1½- to 2-inch chunks

¼ to ½ cup harissa (see above)

¼ cup red wine vinegar

Salt

Various vegetables cut to the size of the venison, such as mushrooms, onions, bell peppers, or zucchini

When you are ready to cook, remove the venison from the marinade. Cut the various vegetables into pieces roughly the size of the venison. Carefully skewer them onto two skewers—doing this makes it much easier to turn the kebabs. I say carefully because you want to watch out for the pointy ends; I've stabbed myself a couple times when I got distracted. When you've made all your skewers, salt everything well and put them back into the fridge.

(continued)

MINESTRA MARITATA

Serves 6 to 8 | Prep Time: 20 minutes | Cook Time: 3 hours

This is the original Italian wedding soup. The name means “married,” not “wedding,” and refers to the fact that bitter greens and rich meats are such a good match they ought to be married. As you look through the ingredient list, you’ll quickly notice that this is something of a Mulligan’s stew. You can vary it as much as you want; you just need a *bunch of different meaty things, a variety of greens, and some cheese.*

Be sure to include some bitter greens when you make this soup. Choices include dandelion greens, chicories, escarole, parsley, turnip greens, collard greens, kale, chard, arugula, and mustard greens. Just wash them well and chop into pieces that you’d want to eat in a soup, and enjoy!

Some venison bones (optional)

1 to 2 pounds random venison bits: neck or
stew meat, ribs, flank, shanks, tongue

A pig’s foot or small smoked hock (optional)

A Parmesan rind (optional)

3 bay leaves

A rosemary sprig, or 2 teaspoons dried

1 large carrot, chopped roughly

2 celery stalks, chopped

1 onion, chopped

Salt

½ pound small soup pasta such as orzo,
ditalini, or pastina (optional)

1 or 2 Italian sausages

¼ pound diced salami (optional)

2 to 4 pounds of chopped greens (see above)

Black pepper to taste

Grated pecorino or Parmesan to taste

Place the venison bones, bits of random venison, and pig’s foot into a large soup pot. Cover with water by 4 inches and bring to a boil. Use a large, shallow spoon to skim all the froth that collects, and when it’s all gone, drop the heat to a bare simmer. Barely let this bubble for the rest of the way. Add the Parmesan rind, bay leaves, and rosemary. Simmer for 2 hours. Add the carrot, celery, and onion, and simmer until the meats are all tender, probably another hour.

Fish out all the meats and let them cool a bit. Fish out the rosemary and Parmesan rind and discard. Pick off all the meat from the various bits, including the pig’s foot; discard all the bones. Chop the pig’s foot into small pieces and return it to the pot with all the meats. Add salt to taste.

Add the greens, pasta, sausage, and salami, and simmer until the pasta is done, about 15 minutes. I like to remove the sausage and slice it into rings at this point, returning it to the soup. Add black pepper to taste, and serve with the grated cheese.

POLISH POT ROAST WITH A VENISON NECK

Serves 4 to 6, depending on the size of the neck | Prep Time: Overnight for the marinade
Cook Time: 3 to 4 hours, or up to 8 hours for a slow cooker

This is my version of the good ole' pot roast that pretty much everyone ate while growing up. What makes it Polish? Only that I found a similar recipe in a book called *Polish Heritage Cookery* by Robert and Maria Strybel. I like the use of flour and paprika, and the overnight wine marinade, each of which adds a layer of flavor to the final dish.

You could, of course, use other cuts for this recipe, such as a shank or a shoulder, or even a hind leg roast. But a whole neck, boned or bone-in, is the perfect cut. The long, slow simmer melts all that connective tissue and gives you an intensely flavored, yielding piece of meat that can either be torn apart roughly or sliced thick and served. Note that although a boned-out neck will be sliceable, you won't get clean cuts unless you chill the meat overnight before slicing. Why bother with that, though? Eat it messy.

- 1 bottle red wine
- 6 to 10 allspice berries, cracked
- 6 to 10 black peppercorns, cracked
- 3 bay leaves
- A 2½ to 4 pound neck roast, boned or bone-in
- Salt
- 1 cup flour
- 3 tablespoons paprika
- 1 tablespoon cayenne (optional)
- ¼ cup lard, bacon fat, or cooking oil
- 2 onions, sliced root to tip
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 3 carrots, cut into large chunks
- 2 parsnips, cut into large chunks
- 3 Yukon Gold potatoes, cut into chunks
- 1 rutabaga or 2 turnips, peeled and cut into chunks
- Black pepper to taste
- Sour cream, for garnish

Bring the wine, allspice, black peppercorns, and bay leaves to a boil. Turn off the heat and let the marinade cool to room temperature. When it's cool, submerge the venison neck in the marinade and keep in the fridge overnight, or up to 4 days.

Mix the flour, paprika, and cayenne (if using) in a large bowl or shallow container large enough to hold the neck roast. Pat the meat dry with paper towels and salt it well. Coat it in the flour-paprika mixture. Heat the lard in a large Dutch oven or other heavy, lidded pot, and brown the meat. With a typical neck roast you will need to cut it into two pieces to get it to fit the pot. Brown one piece and then remove while you brown the other. If you are using a bone-in neck, just turn the meat to brown all sides. When the meat has browned, remove it from the pot and set aside for a moment.

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Add the sliced onions to the pot and brown them well, stirring occasionally. This should take about 8 minutes. Add 2 cups of the marinade and bring it to a boil. Add the venison back to the pot, along with 2 cups of water. Bring to a simmer, cover the pot, and cook in the oven for 1½ hours.

After 1½ hours have elapsed, add the root vegetables and celery and continue to cook for another 1½ hours, or until the meat is falling apart and the root vegetables are tender.

Remove the meat and set on a cutting board. Slice roughly, or pull the meat off the bones. Taste the sauce, and add salt if it needs it. Add black pepper to taste, and serve with the meat and vegetables, with a dollop of sour cream alongside.

A BASIC VENISON BURGER

Serves 4 | Prep Time: 20 minutes, a little more if you are grinding your own meat | Cook Time: 10 minutes

Keep in mind that what's important here is the technique and the grind, not so much my additional ingredients. Of course, I love my venison burgers like this, so I am biased. But so long as you follow general guidelines of mixing something rich (cheese) with something sharp (tomato) and something slightly bitter or cleansing (sorrel leaves) and a touch of sweet (ketchup)—you will be in good shape.

I know many of you get your venison pre-ground from the butcher shop. Go ahead and use what you have for now, but next time make sure that a) the butcher grinds your venison with pork fat, and/or b), if you want, for more stew meat so you can grind the meat yourself.

- 1½ pounds venison meat, from the shoulder, ribs, or hind leg
- ½ pound bacon ends or regular bacon, chopped roughly
- Salt (smoked salt if you have it) and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons butter, lard or vegetable oil
- 1 large or 2 medium onions, sliced thin
- Burger buns
- Something green, like Bibb lettuce, arugula, sorrel, or spinach
- Slices of fresh tomato (summer), or canned, fire-roasted peppers (winter)
- Slices of cheese of your choice
- Condiment of your choice (ketchup, mustard, remoulade, mayo, etc.)

Make sure the meat and bacon are very cold. Cut the venison into chunks that will fit into your grinder. Do the same for the bacon. Mix the two together roughly so you can add a bit of oil. Grind the meat in the grinder as you go. Grind one-half to two-thirds of the meat coarsely and the rest with the fine die. NOTE: If you are making your venison burgers, flip this so you grind two-thirds fine and only one-third coarse—the reason is because fine meat cooks faster and stays juicier when the grinder is done.

Make between 4 and 6 patties, depending on how large you want your burgers. I like big burgers. Form the patties with as much force as absolutely needed—you want the patties to stick together only loosely. Make them about ½ to 1 inch thick. Use your thumb to press an indentation into the center of each patty; this prevents the burgers from turning spherical when they are cooked. Set the burgers aside.

Heat the butter in a frying pan over medium-high heat until it is good and hot, add the sliced onion and cook until it's golden brown and liking. Some people like juicy onion with a little char on the outside; some people prefer to go the full caramelized onion route.

MUSHROOM BURGERS

Serves 6 | Prep Time: 15 minutes | Cook Time: 20 minutes

This is where I break my own law of including nothing inside the burger patty itself. I just like the hit of savory umami flavor from the mushroom powder in these burgers. Consider this the exception that proves the rule. It's a wild game version of the classic mushroom burger you see in hamburger joints all over the country: A big ole' meat patty, topped with grilled or sautéed onions and mushrooms, served with cheese, usually Swiss. Mustard is the traditional accompaniment here, but nobody dies if you use ketchup, too.

I use wild mushrooms here because I am a mushroom forager. If you have access to morels in spring, or dried morels for the powder in the patties, by all means use it. If not, no worries. Any fresh mushroom will do, and most supermarkets sell those little dried packets of porcini or "forest mix" mushrooms. They're perfect for this recipe.

2 pounds ground venison
A small handful dried morels or other mushrooms, about ½ ounce or 3 tablespoons once ground
2 teaspoons dried thyme
½ teaspoon celery seed
12 ounces fresh morels or other mushrooms, chopped
1 medium onion, sliced thin into half-moons
2 tablespoons olive oil
Hamburger buns
6 slices of Swiss or Provolone cheese
Mustard

Grind the dried mushrooms to a powder in a coffee grinder. Mix the dried mushroom powder, celery seed, and thyme with the meat. Shape the meat into patties. When you do this, don't overwork your meat or your hamburgers will become tough and chewy. Crumbly is better than tough, to my mind. Also, press a little indentation into the center of each patty. This helps the patty keep its shape once cooked, because when meat cooks, it tightens up and will turn into a ball shape if you don't have that indentation.

Heat a large sauté pan over high heat, and add the fresh mushrooms. Shake the pan frequently so they don't all stick, and cook the mushrooms until they release their water, about 2 to 4 minutes. As soon as the water has mostly bubbled away, add the olive oil, some salt, and the sliced onion, and sauté until everything has nicely browned, about 6 to 8 minutes. Turn off the heat and set aside.

Salt your burgers and grill them (or cook them in any other way) to your liking. I like mine medium, so I grill over medium-high heat about 3 to 5 minutes per side. I only flip my burgers once. When you flip the burger, let it cook about halfway on the second side before slapping a slice of cheese on the patty. Close the grill lid to let it melt.

To build the burger, first toast the buns (if you want them toasted). Paint with mustard or whatever, then lay down a patty. Top with the mushrooms and onions and have at it! Serve with a salad and a cold beer.

VENISON CHILI

Serves 8 to 10 | Prep Time: 1 hour | Cook Time: 3 hours

Who doesn't love chili? And what hunter doesn't love venison chili? Keep in mind that chili has endless variations: Beans or no beans? Ground meat or chunks? Or no meat at all? Tomato products or no tomato products? Add coffee? Chocolate? Cinnamon? In fact, so far as I can tell, the only things that really must be in chili to make it chili are red peppers of some sort, cumin, and onions.

This is my version and I am pretty proud of it. It hinges on ground venison, but I've made it with all kinds of meats, even ground turkey. What makes my chili unique is the huge amount of dried chiles I use. I will typically use twelve to sixteen dried chiles of all sorts, reconstituted and then pureed with a cup of weak coffee to make the backbone of the dish. My advice is to use at least four kinds of chiles, and not all of them should be super hot. I like a mix of ancho, chipotle, guajillo, chile negro, chile mulato, cascabel, New Mexican, and pasilla chiles. As you get to know these chiles—some are smoky, some hot, some sweet—you can adjust the mix to your taste.

You can find these chiles in any Latin market, and even in many regular supermarkets where there is a Latino population. They're not as hard to find as you might think.

Serve this over rice or polenta, garnished with cilantro, raw onions, and maybe some Mexican *queso seco*, jack cheese, or American cheddar.



1 pound pinto beans or kidney beans
4 each, dried ancho, guajillo, pasilla (ancho),
cascabel, mirasol, or mulato chiles
½ pound bacon or Mexican soft chorizo
1 large onion, diced
6 to 8 cloves garlic, chopped
2 to 3 pounds ground venison
2 tablespoons paprika
2 tablespoons cumin
1 tablespoon ground coriander
2 tablespoons tomato paste
2 large tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and
chopped, or one small can
1 cup of weak coffee
3 tablespoons molasses
Beef or venison broth (have a quart ready)
At least 2 tablespoons salt
Cilantro and shredded cheese to garnish

Soak the beans in water overnight. If you forget to do this the night before, pour boiling water over the beans and soak for 4 hours, changing the water after 2 hours. Break up and seed the chiles, and cover with hot water. (If your hands are sensitive, wear gloves while doing this.) Let stand for an hour or so. Grind to a thick puree, adding about 1 cup of the soaking water and the coffee.

Chop bacon, and fry over medium heat in a Dutch oven or other large, lidded, oven-proof pot. Once the bacon is crispy, remove it and set aside.

Add the ground meat and brown over high heat. You want the highest heat on your most powerful burner here, otherwise the meat will want to steam and stew and not brown. Stir occasionally.

Once all the meat is browned, add onion to the pot and cook for 4 to 6 minutes, stirring often. Add garlic, stir, and cook for 2 minutes. Add the beans, paprika, cumin, coriander, and salt, stirring to combine.

Add chile puree and tomato paste, and stir to combine well. Add chopped tomatoes, molasses, and enough beef broth to cover everything—you want it a little loose now; it'll cook down. I typically need at least a pint of broth, sometimes a quart.

Stir to combine, plunk the lid on and simmer very gently for 2 to 3 hours. Check after 2 hours to see if you need more salt and broth, and to see how the beans are doing. When the beans are tender, you're ready. Use the reserved bacon for garnish . . . or just eat it.