

RAW DRAFT: BEFORE EDITING

By Erin Golden

For most of the four decades he's been a butcher, Raymond Turkas stuck to the basics: beef, pork, poultry.

But about three years ago, Turkas decided to mix up the offerings at Strip District Meats, his Pittsburgh butcher shop. He noticed that some of his younger, "foodie" customers were interested in offal -- meat that comes from animal organs -- and thought there might be a market for a more exotic selection. As he stocked up everything from elk and wild boar to kangaroo and snake meat, customers kept buying -- even if it was more costly than his more standard fare.

"I was initially concerned the price would prohibit the sales," he said, "but then I started noticing whatever I brought in was selling."

From specialty butcher shops to grocery stores, unusual meats are beginning to take up more refrigerator space. For many people, it's a matter of experimenting with something new. But adding some exotic meats to your diet can also benefit your health.

Libby Mills, a West Chester, Penn.-based cooking and nutrition coach, said wild game meat like elk or venison is often higher in iron and lower in fat than standard options like beef.

"In general, they are overall lower in calories because they're lower in fat and have a higher percentage of protein relative to fat," she said.

Mills said elk stands out as a particularly healthy option.

"Elk takes the cake in terms of being the leanest, the lowest in calories, lowest in fat and highest in iron, compared to bison, beef, venison, rabbit and goat," she said. "It's really kind of the utterly best choice."

And while exotic meats alone aren't the cure-all for a healthier eating plan, Mills said experimentation that gets people interested in variety is a good thing.

"It keeps you interested in different kinds of food and makes eating exciting," she said. "For all these reasons, I think they're a welcome part of the American diet."

SIDEBAR: 10 tips for adding exotic meats to your diet

1. Start by trying ground varieties (of a meat like bison) before moving on to specific cuts.
2. Check out the USDA's database of nutrition facts to see what you'll get from a new meat and compare it with other options.
3. Bring your meat out of the refrigerator and let it get to room temperature before cooking. Mills said that will help with the cooking process.
4. Safety first! Make sure the internal temperature of the meat is 165 degrees. "A lot of people like it rare, but to be on the safe side, the only way to test this is to have a food thermometer," Mills said.
5. Look for lean and iron-rich meats when shopping around.
6. Get rid of gamey flavors. Try cooking a rabbit in red wine. Soak elk or venison in ice water for about 12 hours, drain, and repeat before cooking.
7. Cook low and slow. For most exotic meats -- with the exception of rabbit -- Mills suggests keeping cooking temperatures low and cooking times long. Venison, for example, can cook for up to three hours.
8. Try experimenting with new dishes. Make a rabbit cacciatore or cook it in broth with veggies.

9. Don't add fat to meat. With leaner meats like elk or venison, "avoid larding, or cutting little holes and sticking butter wedges in," Mills said. "That defeats the whole purpose."
10. Don't be afraid to try something new. Turkas said meats like frog, turtle, camel and ostrich are popular at his shop.

Up Your Game



Explore your wild side with healthy game meats

BY ERIN GOLDEN

For most of the four decades he's been a butcher, Raymond Turkas stuck to the basics: beef, pork and poultry. But about three years ago, Turkas decided to mix up the offerings at Strip District Meats, his Pittsburgh butcher shop.

He noticed that some of his younger "foodie" customers were interested in offal—meat that comes from animal organs—and thought there might be a market for a more exotic selection. As he stocked up on everything from elk and wild boar to kangaroo and snake meat, customers kept buying, even if it was more costly than his standard fare.

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prohibit the sales," he says. "But then I started noticing whatever I brought in was selling."

From specialty butcher shops to grocery stores, unusual meats are beginning to take up more refrigerator space. For many people, they get a kick out of experimenting with something new. But adding exotic meats to your diet can also benefit your health.

Wild game meats such as elk and venison are often higher in iron and lower in fat than standards such as beef, says Libby Mills, a West Chester, Pa.-based cooking and nutrition coach.

"They are overall lower in calories because they're lower in fat and have a higher percentage of protein relative to fat," she says.

Elk stands out as a particularly healthy option, Mills says.

"Elk takes the cake in terms of being the leanest, the lowest in calories, lowest in fat and highest in iron, compared to bison, beef, venison, rabbit and goat," she says. "It's the best choice."

And while incorporating exotic meats may be just one part of healthier eating plan, Mills says experimentation that gets people interested in variety is a good thing.

"It keeps you interested in different kinds of food and makes eating exciting," she says. "For all these reasons, I think they are a welcome part of the American diet."

9 WILD PREP TIPS

If you're eyeing that cut of bison or rabbit, but aren't sure what to do with it, just follow a few basic rules.

1 Start by trying ground varieties of meat like bison before moving on to specific cuts.

2 Check out the USDA's National Nutrient Database, at NDB.nal.usda.gov/ndb to see what nutrients you'll get from each type of meat. Choose lean and iron-rich meats when shopping around.

3 Take your meat out of the refrigerator and let it come to room temperature before cooking. Mills says that will help with the cooking process.

4 Cook meat until the internal temperature is 165 degrees. "To be on the safe side, the only way to test this is to have a food thermometer," Mills says.

5 To get rid of gamey flavors, cook rabbit in red wine. Soak elk or venison in ice water for about 12 hours, drain and repeat before cooking.

6 With the exception of rabbit, Mills suggests cooking exotic meats for a long time at low temperatures. Venison, for example, can cook for up to three hours.

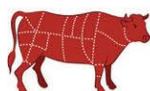
7 Experiment with new dishes. You can make a rabbit cacciatore or simply cook up some meat with veggies in broth.

8 To keep the nutritional benefits, avoid adding fat.

9 Don't be afraid to try something new. Turkas says frog, turtle, camel and ostrich meats are popular at his shop.

KNOW YOUR MEAT

If you want to cut calories, up your protein intake or watch your cholesterol, consider your regular meat of choice. Exploring game options can expand your typical flavor profile, while adding some serious vitamins and nutrients to your diet. Check out how nutrients in 3-ounce portions of your favorite meats stack up against similarly portioned wild game options.



Ground Beef (80/20)



Ground Pork



Ground Venison



Ground Bison



Chicken Breast



Rabbit



Elk

	Ground Beef (80/20)	Ground Pork	Ground Venison	Ground Bison	Chicken Breast	Rabbit	Elk
CALORIES	215	224	134	124	102	97	94
PROTEIN	14.55 g	14.36 g	18.52 g	17.21 g	19.12 g	18.53 g	19.52 g
FAT	16.95 g	18.02 g	6.06 g	6.13 g	2.23 g	1.97 g	1.23 g
IRON	1.64 mg	0.75 mg	2.48 mg	2.36 mg	0.31 mg	10 mg	2.35 mg
CHOLESTEROL	60 mg	61 mg	68 mg	47 mg	62 mg	69 mg	47 mg