

Living off the Fat of the Land

When the going gets tough, the tough...go hunting. As strange as it may seem to some city dwellers, the solution for getting through these tough economic times may be as close as the backwoods, according to wildlife experts at Auburn University.

"Living off the fat of the land has never been more appropriate than now," says Dr. Mark Smith, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System wildlife specialist and Auburn University professor of forestry and wildlife sciences. "Wild game is one of the most nutritious and healthy sources of protein available," he says, citing deer, turkeys, rabbits, ducks and squirrels as some of the protein sources available in Alabama.

Smith says many people pass off such protein sources as poor man's fare, though quite the opposite is true. In large cities, many of these foods qualify as fine dining. "You'll pay big bucks for duck breast or quail at some of the finer Atlanta restaurants," he says.

For people with a need of or taste for wild game, the Alabama outdoors is especially well-suited for several reasons: an overabundance of deer, a lengthy hunting season and liberal bag limits. For skilled hunters, wild game can also yield ample cost savings.

"The average deer will yield about 25 to 30 pounds of meat," says Dr. Stephen Ditchkoff, an associate professor and deer expert in Auburn University's School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences. "And with hamburger selling for about \$2.50 a pound, a couple of deer in the freezer adds up to big cost savings," he says. Moreover, venison steaks, tenderloins and roasts are both tasty and a good nutritional option, he says. Venison is not only high in protein, iron and B vitamins, but compared with beef and pork is lower in calories, saturated fat and cholesterol, Ditchkoff says.

Even so, he offers one word of caution: Before heading into the woods, one should take care to purchase the appropriate licenses, the costs of which are minimal, and follow all applicable rules and hunting regulations. Not following these rules and regulations could cost thousands of dollars in game violations and court fines, he warns.

Also, be sure to secure the permission of the landowner before hunting. State-owned wildlife management areas, national forests and some national wildlife refuges also offer prime hunting opportunities, Ditchkoff says.

One excellent but sometimes overlooked wild game food source is feral hogs, which can be trapped as well as hunted. "The meat can be turned into some of the tastiest barbecue meat this side of the Mississippi," Ditchkoff says. Their classification as exotic animals also means that feral pigs are governed by less stringent game laws, which allows them to be harvested in greater numbers. In fact, an investment of only a couple of hundred dollars in traps and related supplies can yield an almost unlimited supply of wild pork, Ditchkoff says.

Smith and Ditchkoff practice what they preach. "Hunting for my own food has been a way of life for me," says Smith, an avid hunter, who says he has not bought hamburger meat at the grocery store since the mid-1990s.

So, what will it be: pan-seared venison medallions with shallots and red wine or sautéed duck breast with gingered grape sauce? That's entirely up to the hunter, Smith says.

What is certain is that wild game meat can be served up as readily and as delectably as any other fare. "With wild game, it's entirely possible to eat like a king while saving on grocery costs," Smith says.