

meet the man who believes wild meat is best

Living on the wild side

Stuart McLanaghan has come up with a delicious way to reduce our environmental footprint – by eating wild venison. Clare Hargreaves met him on the Cumbrian fells where the deer roam Main picture: Dave Willis

If your idea of a gastronomic treat is chomping your way through a beef fillet steak or nibbling a delicately flavoured chicken breast, you may be behind the times. Farmed meat has passed its sell-by date. Wild meat is where it's at – in particular, venison.

At least, that's the thinking of ex-engineer and environmentalist Stuart McLanaghan, whose company, Deliciously Wild, sells wild venison by mail order and in Waitrose stores throughout the north of England. Most of it comes from within 75 miles of his processing plant in Cumbria's lush Eden Valley.

Thanks to a lack of predators, the number of wild deer in Britain has exploded in recent decades, putting pressure on forestry, farming and even traffic – around 74,000 deer are involved in vehicle collisions every year. No one knows the exact size of the wild population, but experts estimate it at between one and 1.5 million – more than at any time in the past thousand years. The best way to deal with this surfeit of nutritious and tasty meat, believes Stuart, is to eat it.

Population increase

Deer are spreading – fast. Native red deer, traditionally confined to the Scottish Highlands, can now be found as far south as Devon and Cornwall. Roe deer, also native to Britain, are on the move too, extending into urban parks and gardens. Also booming is the fallow deer (thought to have been introduced by the Normans), and the more recently introduced sika, Chinese water deer, and above all, the prolific muntjac.

Landowners have long managed the problem by shooting. Experts say more probably need to be culled. Whereas in the past, some culled deer might have been left to rot on the hillside, today Stuart believes this is wasteful and no longer acceptable.

He hopes that by creating a market for wild venison, he can provide incentives for

excess deer to be put to profitable use. And by paying a consistent premium price for venison all year round, he can help the local economy, too.

We eat around 3m tonnes of farmed red meat a year in this country, much of it fed on imported feed. "This is madness when we have so much wild meat such as venison and rabbit on our doorstep," says Stuart. "We also

import farmed red deer from New Zealand, which is nonsensical. By getting British wild meat into our food chain, I

believe we could significantly reduce our environmental footprint."

Stuart, who first developed an interest in deer 20 years ago while working as a volunteer on the Isle of Rum in the Inner Hebrides and then went on to train in environmental management, claims not to have eaten farmed meat for 10 years.

The only snag is that many of us aren't used to eating venison – so much gets exported. Of all our red meats, it's probably the most misunderstood, says Stuart. "Ask people what they think of venison and they'll say it's posh nosh, expensive, hard to cook, or gamey. Actually none of these are true."

Keen to make it accessible to all, Stuart turns much of his wild venison into easy-to-

cook foods such as burgers, sausages and steaks. And to satisfy all tastes, he rates their strength of flavour on a scale of one to six.

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And by using different species, Stuart can guarantee supply throughout the year. So it's as good on the barbecue as in a warming winter stew.

Above all, Stuart is eager to spread the word that venison is one of the healthiest red meats there is. This is thanks to the fact that a deer feeds on a varied diet of nutrient-rich foods itself and, because it has to cover large



LEFT Stuart looking for deer on the Cumbrian Fells **ABOVE** Individual animals, such as this roe buck, are carefully selected and killed as part of a cull plan **INSET** Stuart surveys the Eden Valley, in north Cumbria

Photos: Paul Hobson/Naturepl.com





1 Carcasses that Deliciously Wild uses must carry a tag proving that it was humanely shot 2 Venison meat is a delicious treat that everyone should try, says Stuart 3 Stuart inspects the large carcass of a red deer

» distances to forage for food, develops virtually no fat. Venison also has more iron than any other red meat and is high in protein and omega-3 fatty acids too. “As hunters, our evolutionary palates evolved on wild meat,” says Stuart.

There are no proven nutritional differences between farmed and wild venison. However, wild venison, because it gets more exercise and eats a foraged diet, tends to be tighter grained, leaner and more flavoursome than farmed venison.

But sourcing deer from the wild does not on its own guarantee excellence. The way they are killed is vital. So Stuart ensures deer are dispatched only by qualified deer managers as part of an annual cull plan. Each deer must carry a tag proving it was humanely

shot. “If old farmer Tom knocks on the door with a carcass we don’t take it,” says Stuart. “To ensure the highest animal welfare, we only source from approved suppliers.”

No waste

Carcasses are hung for up to 10 days, then skinned and hung for another day or two before being butchered. I watch Stuart’s business partner Chris Snelgar, and his wife Linda, joint the meat with mathematical precision. The best cuts will be sold as steaks or medallions, the middle grade ones will go into burgers and sausages, while the lower grade meat and bones will be used in pet food. Virtually no part of the deer is wasted.

We break our conversation to taste some venison sausages. Free of gristle and robustly

flavoured, they hit the spot. Stuart’s favourite, though, is spaghetti bolognese using venison mince. “People don’t always realise that venison mince can be used exactly as you’d use beef mince,” he says. As a treat, Stuart loves a loin steak marinated in oil, crushed garlic and seasoning, sizzled on a hot skillet.

“With meat like this, it’s hard to understand why we’re so hooked on our beef,” says Stuart. “A six ounce venison steak has the same protein as seven and a half ounces of beef steak. And less fat than skinned chicken. So it can satisfy both the alpha male who wants his steak, and his partner who’s watching her waistline. What’s not to love?”

► Find out more

📍 www.deliciouslywild.co.uk

Know your deer

Britain is home to six species of deer. The roe and the red are native, while the fallow has been here for at least 1,000 years. So what’s the difference between them, where will you find them, how many are there, and how do they taste?



ROE

Small deer with reddish brown summer coat, turning to grey or pale brown in winter.

Where Throughout Scotland and England except parts of Kent and the Midlands. Moving into Wales.

Population At least 800,000

Strength of flavour



RED

Britain’s largest land mammal has a reddish brown summer coat. Its winter coat is brown to grey.

Where Scotland, northern England, East Anglia and south-west England.

Population At least 350,000

Strength of flavour



FALLOW

Thought to have been introduced by the Normans, the fallow has a fawn coat with white spotting.

Where Throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland. A few in Scotland.

Population Between 150,000 and 200,000

Strength of flavour



SIKA

Introduced from Far East in 1860, the sika has similar markings to the fallow deer and is medium-sized.

Where Widespread in Scotland, with a few in England and Northern Ireland.

Population Around 35,000

Strength of flavour



MUNTJAC

The smallest, and fastest expanding, UK deer species. First introduced in Bedfordshire in the early 1900s.

Where Widespread in southern and central England, and Wales.

Population At least 150,000

Strength of flavour



CHINESE WATER

Sized between muntjac and roe, these deer have large rounded ears. Some escaped from Whipsnade Zoo, where they’d been introduced in 1929, and spread.

Where East Anglia.

Population At least 10,000

Strength of flavour



Source for population figures: Government postnote Feb 2009