Here in South Central Texas, there is no separating the abbreviated days of autumn from the kickoff of deer-hunting season.

It begins with an influx of camouflage: hats, hoodies and beer can insulators. Ordinarily sleepy motels straight out of "The Last Picture Show" and drive-through beverage barns (where you can purchase a six-pack of Shiner Bock and bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos from the comfort of your pickup) display signs that effuse, "Welcome Hunters!" And at a Wal-Mart along a stretch of Highway 90, a plastic banner that reads "Hunting Headquarters" dances in the hot, dry wind.

For me, all this fanfare translates to fall eating at its best: venison stars in spicy chili, seared chops, lusty stews, gutsy burgers and chicken-fried cutlets. When I lived in New York, and was spoiled by a stream of white tablecloth restaurants, venison appeared with less of a bang. It was the brazen yet somewhat tactical menu choice, strategically listed below more familiar meats and served with the inevitable fruit sauce. But I suspect that in both urban and rural landscapes, the impulse to eat venison is the same: the increasingly rare opportunity to taste something wild.

In our culture of benign beige cutlets that can be eaten without association to the animal to which they were once attached, game is somewhat of an aberration. When it comes to venison (from the Latin venari, to hunt), it is less possible to separate the meat from the animal, or the animal from the hunt.

Venison has one-third the calories of beef and less cholesterol than a skinless chicken breast. But for me, it's all about the flavor - it is as wild, fragrant and inscrutable as hills that surround this ranch.
Luckily for me, venison here is as common as men in tight-fitting Wranglers or Willie Nelson on the radio. When I pick up my mail at the Rio Frio Post Office, Sharon, the postmistress, boasts about her venison chili. At the casually hip Liberty Bar in San Antonio, the juicy venison burger, served with grainy mustard and grilled potatoes, sells as well as the beef burger.

Venison may be "what's for dinner" on back county roads, but unless you're a hunter you will pay a premium to ensure that the product is processed under government inspection. And it is illegal to buy venison that hasn't been harvested under these regulations. I can't buy venison at my local supermarket, where the regulatory markup makes it too expensive to sell.

Over the years, when I have asked chefs from around the country to deconstruct their game dishes, they invariably cited the same source for the meat: Broken Arrow Ranch in Ingram, Tex. When my life took an unexpected detour and I moved to the Hill Country four years ago, I found myself 40 miles from Broken Arrow and became a regular customer. I sent a box of their delicious smoked venison sausage to my dad for Father's Day. I also found myself living on a ranch among every animal on the Broken Arrow roster. Is this a conflict? No. It only makes me revere the meat more.

Broken Arrow Ranch harvests several varieties of venison (axis, sika and fallow deer), antelope (blackbuck and South Texas Antelope, or nilgai), and wild boar from 150 licensed ranches, primarily in the Hill Country and South Texas. The animals are free range in the truest sense. The antelope and deer browse on native grass, wild herbs and the new growth on brush and trees. The result is meat that develops complex flavors rarely found in farmed animals. The company mostly supplies fine restaurants, but its Web site, brokenarrowranch.com, has a growing audience among adventurous home cooks. It reported a 16 percent increase in sales in the last two years.

Venison is described as gamy, but that's too vague. To me, gaminess translates to actually tasting the wild and fragrant landscape. In each bite, there is mountain juniper, wild persimmon, sun-drenched limestone, a current of prickly pear and the cool eucalyptus scent of an agarita bush.

When I spent time cooking at a chateau in France, I learned an important lesson. Meats are often best seasoned with the flavors that flourish around them. So when I think of perfuming axis chops (my favorite variety; the meat is rich, tender and finely textured), I gravitate to juniper and rosemary, the cool, piney flavors that I hike through each day. As a vehicle for the herbs, I make a paste with shallots and a bit of grapeseed oil. I season the chops, rub them with the paste and leave them in the fridge for at least 30 minutes or up to 8 hours. When seared in a hot skillet, the shallots crust the meat with a sweet, toasted flavor. I deglaze the skillet with riesling, which lights up the herbs and reduces to an aromatic pan sauce. I like to drag a forkful of the herbaceous meat through stone-ground grits, their pleasingly coarse texture softened by thick, tangy Mexican crema (crème fraîche or sour cream would be just as delicious).
Marinating venison, often in buttermilk or wine, tenderizes the meat and removes the "gamy" taste. But in excess, marinating can also conceal the meat's unique flavor.

I have never been a fan of the cloying fruit sauce that is a common partner for venison (black pools of blueberry sauce give me IHOP flashbacks). But there is logic in the pairing. As with wine and vinegar, the natural acid in the fruit tenderizes the meat.

For venison, I follow my natural impulses and opt for simple preparations that showcase the flavor of the meat. I reach for salt, fresh herbs, aromatic vegetables, Mexican flavors and a luscious condiment.

True to Texas tradition, the most beloved local preparation is chicken-fried back strap (the top loin that extends down the back on either side of the spine). The habit of pounding meat (traditionally round steak), dipping it in egg and milk, dredging it in flour twice and frying it in hot oil is so ingrained in the culinary persona here that the August issue of Texas Monthly magazine devoted a spread to chicken-fried everything, including bacon and foie gras. Though credited to cowboys, the cooking method was probably taken from 19th-century German settlers who breaded and fried veal cutlets for Wiener schnitzel.

Our chapter for cold weather eating is brief, so as soon as the temperature drops I seize the opportunity to wear cashmere, light campfires and simmer stew. Venison never becomes as buttery as beef, but once the cubes are browned and simmered for a few hours, the meat softens beautifully.

I have made the Border Town hunter's stew with both deer and antelope stew meat. The venison tastes slightly richer, and the latter has a milder taste and a texture that suggests veal. When it comes to aromatics, I reach for sweet onions, poblano chilies, plenty of garlic, Mexican oregano, a few fresh bay leaves and ground red chili. An amber beer is thrown in for good measure. I prefer using chicken broth for venison stews because beef broth can overpower the meat. The subtle sweetness of hominy and pumpkin and their melting textures are delicious partners for the meat and spice.

At the end of the day, I can't resist a fat, juicy burger. You can buy venison with 15 percent beef fat added, but I love the clean taste of the pure grind. As long as the meat is not overworked or cooked beyond medium-rare, it will still be juicy (a slather of pasilla chile mayo doesn't hurt this cause, either). I season the patties with a bit of cumin, fresh marjoram or oregano from my garden, and a splash of Worcestershire. Pan-sear the burgers in a hot cast-iron skillet or, better yet, grill them over a slow-burning wood fire - which gives you time to crack open a beer and watch the light fade.

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Border Town Hunter's Stew with Poblanos, Pumpkin and Hominy
(New York Times, Paula Disbrowe, October 19, 2005)

Time: 2 hours 45 minutes

3 pounds antelope or venison stew meat, cut into 2-inch cubes
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 medium onions, chopped
2 poblano chilies, chopped
6 cloves garlic, minced
1 small sugar pumpkin or 1 medium butternut squash, peeled and cubed (about 3 cups)
3 tablespoons (or to taste) New Mexico chili powder or ancho chili powder
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon dried Mexican oregano
2 bay leaves (preferably fresh)
1 cinnamon stick
1 12-ounce bottle amber beer (such as Shiner Bock, Bohemia or Dos Equis Amber)
4 cups chicken stock or canned broth, or more as needed
2 15.5-ounce cans of white hominy, drained
Lime wedges, for garnish.

1. Season meat generously with salt and pepper, and set aside for 30 minutes. In large heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat, heat oil until very hot but not smoking. Add meat in batches (do not overcrowd pan) and sear until well browned on all sides. Using slotted spoon, transfer to bowl.

2. Add onions and chilies to pan, and reduce heat to medium. Sauté until softened, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and sauté another 2 minutes. Add pumpkin, chili powder, oregano, bay leaves and cinnamon stick. Sauté until spices thicken into paste and coat vegetables, about 2 minutes. Add beer and stir well, scraping bottom of pan.

3. Return meat to pan, and add 4 cups chicken stock and hominy. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, partly covered, until meat is tender, 2 to 2½ hours. Add more stock or water, if necessary, to prevent stew from becoming too thick.

4. To serve, discard bay leaves and adjust salt to taste. Serve hot, garnished with wedges of lime.

Yield: 6 to 8 servings.
Venison Burgers With Pasilla Chile Mayonnaise  
(New York Times, Paula Disbrowe, October 19, 2005)

Time: 45 minutes

For mayonnaise:
2 dried pasilla chiles
2 cloves garlic, unpeeled
1 teaspoon sherry wine vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
1 ½ cups mayonnaise

For burgers:
1 ¼ pounds ground venison
1 ½ teaspoons cumin
2 tablespoons chopped fresh marjoram or oregano
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
4 hamburger buns, toasted
Lettuce and sliced tomatoes, as desired
Grilled onions, optional.

1. For mayonnaise: Cover medium cast-iron skillet with foil, and place over medium-high heat. Add chiles and garlic, turning as necessary until evenly toasted, fragrant, and browned. (Chiles will soften and darken a few shades, and begin to smell like chocolate and raisins. The peel of the garlic will blister and blacken.) Set garlic aside to cool, then peel. Transfer chiles to a small bowl of water, using a plate to keep them submerged. Soak for 20 minutes, then stem, seed and coarsely chop.

2. In bowl of a small food processor, combine garlic, vinegar and honey. Pulse to combine. Add chiles, then purée to make rough paste. Add mayonnaise and pulse to blend. Transfer to covered container and refrigerate.

3. For burgers: Heat skillet or grill. In large bowl, gently combine venison, cumin, marjoram, Worcestershire sauce and salt and pepper to taste; do not overwork meat. Shape into four patties. Sear or grill to taste; for a juicy burger, do not cook beyond medium-rare. Serve on toasted buns with lettuce, tomato, onions (if desired) and a generous slather of pasilla mayonnaise.

Yield: 4 servings.
Seared Axis Deer Chops With Crema Grits
(New York Times, Paula Disbrowe, October 19, 2005)

Time: 1 hour 15 minutes

For chops:
4 venison chops (preferably from axis deer), about 1 inch thick
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons juniper berries, coarsely chopped
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary leaves (about a 6-inch sprig)
2 medium shallots, coarsely chopped
1 teaspoon plus 1 tablespoon grapeseed oil
½ cup dry riesling or other white wine

For grits:
1 cup good quality stone-ground grits
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 bay leaves (preferably fresh)
¼ cup Mexican crema, sour cream or crème fraîche
4 sprigs fresh rosemary, for garnish
Whole juniper berries, for garnish.

1. For the chops: Generously season chops with salt and pepper to taste. In bowl of a small food processor, combine juniper berries, rosemary, shallots and 1 teaspoon grapeseed oil. Process to make a thick paste. (Alternatively, mixture may be puréed using a mortar and pestle.) Spread paste evenly over chops. Set aside for 1 hour, or refrigerate up to 8 hours, bringing to room temperature before cooking.

2. For the grits: About 1 hour before cooking chops, place 4 cups water in a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil, and whisk in grits in a slow, steady stream. Using a wooden spoon, stir in ½ teaspoon salt and bay leaves. Partly cover pan, and reduce heat to low. Simmer, stirring occasionally, until grits are thick and begin to pull away from sides of pan, about 45 minutes. Discard bay leaves. Stir in crema, and season with salt and pepper to taste.

3. Place a large, well-seasoned skillet over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. Add remaining 1 tablespoon grapeseed oil and swirl to coat. Add chops to skillet and sear until browned underneath, about 4 minutes, then turn and brown for another 3 minutes. Transfer to warm plate and cover with foil. Stir wine into skillet, adding any juices that have drained from the chops. Simmer until liquid has reduced to ¼ cup.

4. To serve, place a generous spoonful of grits on each plate. Top with chop and drizzle with a few spoonfuls of reduced wine. Garnish with a sprig of rosemary and a few whole juniper berries.

Yield: 4 servings.