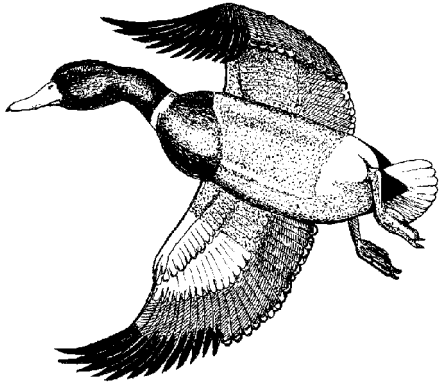


WATERFOWL & DRY AGING

*THE answer to obtaining
tender, juicy & delicate tasting birds*



Once again, we are in the middle of waterfowl season. A more dedicated group of outdoorsmen you will not be able to find. This is, for many a year round obsession. It starts with maintaining brooding ponds; clearing weeds and patching levees. It doesn't stop with that either. There's also the painting of decoys, practicing a wide variety of calls and getting the latest camo, gear and gadgets and making all the repairs on the trailers or camps, not to mention getting all those reservations for the refuges. All to be READY.

There are many styles of hunting waterfowl and there are just as many antidotes to prepare them for cooking. Waterfowlers, for as dedicated as they are about their pursuits are probably the biggest victims when it comes to *accurate* information about the proper handling of this often misunderstood meat source. We have been pursuing these wonderful creatures for a very long time and many folks handle ducks and geese the way that they were taught or, as I have heard for years, "that's the way we always did it."

I can't begin to tell you how many people want to know, "how do I get rid of that gamey, muddy taste of my ducks & geese. And, "it always comes out tough" or worse, "I love to hunt ducks and geese but boy oh boy I can't get anyone to eat'em!" Well, we can address all of those issues at one time.

The first thing we need to understand is what waterfowl are - they are the equivalent to Olympic athletes. When you think about it, *all* they do is migrate thousands of miles only to return a couple of months later. To say they're on a continuous exercise program would be a huge understatement!

Have you ever wondered why their muscles are so dark? Well they have this process called "re-oxygenation," it allows these birds to fly for hundreds of miles at a time. The reason they can achieve this is they have about 50% more blood than most land animals. This extra blood supplies the needed oxygen to its heart and lungs during these lengthy excursions. Contrary to this, are upland birds, which have very light colored muscles, with minimal amounts of blood. When you flush a pheasant they fly for about 300 yards and then they have to land. With minimal amounts of blood their heart rate accelerates and is easily fatigued.

So, waterfowl are able to fly for great distances, BUT that comes with a price – due to this abundant amount of blood their muscle tissue is very aggressive in flavor. When you consider that capillary blood found in muscle tissue is the broken down byproducts of what that animal has consumed. This is why that Mule Deer that has been feeding on sage for the past 7 years has a strong aggressive sagey flavor or the diver duck that has been feeding on aquatic plant life or small fish has a fishy or muddy flavor. All of what is consumed is present in our blood!

The only NATURAL way to breakdown these highly developed and very saturated muscle structure is "DRY AGING." This couldn't be more important when it comes to handling your ducks and geese.

Many outdoors-people have heard of dry aging, but often associate this with big game animals. They too, certainly benefit from dry aging, but as previously mentioned they don't have the excess blood issue. They have other issues to make them require dry aging, like highly developed muscles they need for running up and down 10,000 foot mountains escaping predators.

Yes, I know there are thousands of myths and remedies for making your ducks and geese tender and eliminating the gamey muddy flavor often associated with these creatures. And, yes, there are enzymes that chemically break down these tissues. And there are seasoning blends out there that will cover up just about anything! But, there is a much more natural way to achieve better results and that is what we are looking for, RESULTS!

First off, just like fresh fish shouldn't be a fishy...game shouldn't be gamey. A different richer flavor, yes but not gamey where it is offensive. If it is then a number of things could have contributed to that.

1. Your waterfowl wasn't cleanly killed and it was subject to stress, causing a tremendous adrenaline rush, thus filling the muscles with additional blood and endorphins. Which leave the meat in a very tough state.
2. After harvest cleaning was delayed to the point that the internal juices of the duck/geese started to spoil the meat (cross contamination).
3. Your harvest was subject to warm temperature for too long, increasing bacterial growth. (between 45°F – 140°F bacteria growth is greatest)
4. Your freezing/defrosting procedure was improperly handled
5. Your harvest was consumed "at too fresh a state." – **This is what we will cover.**

Key Factor When Dry Aging Your Waterfowl

There's always a price to pay for short cuts!

Dry aging waterfowl will give you the best results when your dealing with a full carcass. That means a plucked, eviscerated bird, cleaned bird. Having the breast and legs attached to the carcass slows this process down. It also gives you the greatest yield of meat. The fat and bones dry out and not the breast meat itself. If you try and dry age naked breasts (which is that shortcut I spoke of earlier) by the time you achieve an appropriate amount of time to drain the blood and break down the fiber structure the breast will be shriveled like a piece of inedible jerky. Plus having whole birds gives you the bones that can be turned into delicious stocks and sauces and the fat can be rendered to be used for making classic dishes like confit with the legs.

What You'll Need

1. A tray or sheet pan large enough to hold all you birds/breasts.
2. A screen or rack that will keep the meat from sitting in its blood
3. A refrigerator
4. Time and patience!

This process can be done before the birds are frozen (right after the hunt) or, as needed as you take them from the freezer. It doesn't matter when it happens, just that it happens. Most of us don't have the convenience of a large walk-in refrigerator big enough to hold a large amount of birds. Ideal temperature for dry aging is above freezing 32°F and below 45°F.

If your dealing with fresh birds, simply cut out the spines of your birds and lay them on the rack, cut side down. This allows the blood to freely flow out of the meat. The exact amount of time you'll need for the specific species will be posted below.

If your dealing with birds coming out of the freezer take your wrapped birds and place it on a plate or tray **in the refrigerator**. Leave the wrapper intact. We want to slow the defrosting process down as slow as possible. This will allow the meat to retain its natural juices. The average sized duck will take about two days, larger geese 3-4. When it is totally thawed out remove the wrapper. Discard the blood, pat dry the bird. Again cut out the spine and place cut side down on the rack (If you have a good amount of spines, rinse them off, chop into 2 inch chunks and make some delicious duck stock for reduction later to make sauce for your breasts OR give to your loving retriever!) Make sure there is good air circulation around the meat.

You may want to do this in the downstairs frig. as your wife might not be too happy with a bunch of ducks bleeding in her frig. However, she WILL be very happy with the results!



The color of an aged waterfowl will go from an eggplant purple color to the color of a piece of veal. You can tell if your birds are aged enough by squeezing the breast meat with your fingers. If the meat

yields to the pressure, it means the fibrous tissues are broken down and it is ready. If it feels rubbery and bounces back, it might need a little longer. Once you have Dry Aged your birds, and trust me once you do this you'll never handle your birds any other way, At this point bone the breasts out, Trim the fat from the breasts and carcass and save for rendering. I save all the legs from my ducks and place them into a freezer bag until I've collected enough to put them to use. I've made meatballs, soups, stocks, sauces, and chili. I you really want to impress your guests try curing the legs and make mini smoked duck hams.

Dry Aging, although timely, will give you results you never thought possible This process gives you the best of both worlds, tender and mild. If you thought your favorite waterfowl recipe was good before...wait until you try it with an aged piece of meat!

You've worked very hard for your harvests, enjoy them to their maximum potential. I can't tell you how many dinner guests of mine where amazed at how tender and subtle flavors a waterfowl meal can be.

Your guests will think so too.

Recommended Dry Aging time for Red Meat Birds

Doves 1 day Band-tailed pigeons 1-2 days

Teal (sm. ducks) 1-2 days Widgeon (med. ducks) 2-4 days

Sprig/Mallards (lg. ducks) 4-7 days Specks/Snow Geese 7-10 days

Honkers 10-14 days

