



# COOLER'S FULL

## TAKING CARE OF YOUR VENISON WHEN THE PROCESSOR IS BRIMMING

*You can still fill your freezer with high-quality venison, even if getting it processed isn't an option. These do-it-yourself steps can save you money and produce great meals.*

■ by Brandon Self





■ When your venison is ready for processing, you can forge a plan on how to handle the cuts.



“Cooler’s full.” Those are the two most dreaded words for a hunter who has harvested a deer and expects to drop it off at a processor.

But they don’t have to carry dread. With a sharp knife and a little will power, you can provide your family with high-quality venison cuts in your home. And with a few pieces of good equipment, you can have a full-fledged processing facility that can save you money through time.

As the owner of a venison processor for more than 15 years, and having worked in the business for almost 25 years, I’ve seen every possible scenario between a customer and business. The last month of the season is the toughest on a processor, as everyone needs to meet their quota for meat in the freezer, and time is running out. Cooler space is limited, and a deer carcass typically needs to hang about 14 days for the aging process to occur. Balancing time and space is a delicate act for the business. As a customer, you should have a backup plan in case this happens.

## FIRST STEPS

First, always remove the animal’s entrails immediately after you harvest it, if possible, and have a place to keep the carcass cool until you have time to process it. That can be a spot in a friend’s walk-in cooler. Or if the temperature is consistently colder than 46 degrees, you can hang it in a tree wrapped in netting to prevent bugs and other critters from damaging it. The other option is to keep the meat in a cooler packed with ice, and then drain and replace the ice every other day until it’s time to process the meat. To truly age deer meat, I’ve found that it needs to hang head-down for 10 to 14 days in 35- to 45-degree temperatures with good air circulation around it. I recommend that you keep deer meat in a cooler packed with ice no longer than three to five days. Keeping the meat cool is of the utmost importance for the best product.

## MAKING THE CUTS

When the carcass is ready for processing, you can develop a plan on how to handle the cuts. With a small investment in extra equipment, such as a grinder and

cuber, you can make every cut and product a processor can make, including ground venison, cubed steak, sausage and stew meat. If you just want to use the knife, you can cut steaks, roasts, stew meat and any whole cut. A good meat saw is always a great addition to your processing arsenal, as it will help break down the animal.

## KEEPING IT

Finally, after your meat has been processed, it must be frozen. A good freezer paper with a plastic coating is great

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for freezing venison. If you want to improve its longevity, you can invest in a vacuum sealing system for better protection against freezer burn.

**Author’s note:** In the next issue of *Whitetail News*, I will continue this conversation with a further breakdown of my favorite equipment and the uses of each piece.

