A master European chef creates three easy-to-make recipes that'll satisfy anyone's outdoor cravings.

Wildly Delicious

Recipes courtesy of
Executive Chef Lasse Sorensen,
Tom's Place, DeSoto
Photos by Joe McFarland

Hunters and anglers always know where their food comes from. When it comes to tracking down locally raised food, what could be more local than harvesting food from the woods behind the house, or over at a nearby state fish and wildlife area? Plus, the culinary potential of meat and fish that's never available in supermarkets remains one of Illinois' wildest kitchen secrets. It's why master chef Lasse Sorensen, owner of Tom's Place in DeSoto, loves to showcase for his friends the wild side of cooking when he's not busy running his historic roadhouse north of Carbondale. For private dinner parties, Sorensen invites his pals to experience the original local food—everything from fresh-caught crappie to venison and even squirrel—with a gourmet touch.

"A lot of people think all meat is supposed to taste like beef, pork or chicken," the Danish-born chef announced. "Or that all fish is supposed to taste like fish sticks. I love wild game because it allows me to make dishes you can't duplicate with store-bought meat and fish."

Master Chef and hunter Lasse Sorensen loves to include the unique flavors of wild game—including squirrel—for special dinners.

Squirrel ravioli in a buttery sage sauce? Crappie filets served with a hot, creamy vinegar dressing? Venison loin stuffed with Italian sausage? The seemingly unlikely inventions are presented here as a holiday special for *Outdoor*-Illinois readers. These simple and straightforward recipes—while deliciously fancy—can be prepared with easily available ingredients. Nature is where to find the main ingredients, which is where the best local food always originates.

All recipes serve 4

Italian Sausage-stuffed Venison with Lingonberry Sauce

2 lb. venison loin (backstrap)
1 lb. fresh Italian sausage links
2 tbsp. butter or oil
salt and pepper to taste
½ cup dry white wine

Lingonberry sauce:

4 tbsp. roasting pan drippings
2 cups beef stock
4 tbsp. lingonberry preserves
2 tbsp. corn starch mixed with 4 tbsp. cold water

Slice venison backstrap in half lengthwise, creating two portions 10-12 inches long*. Using a skewer, bore an

opening through both portions to allow sausage to be tucked inside. Sprinkle stuffed venison with salt and pepper. In a hot skillet, add butter or oil and sear venison, turning to brown each side for a minute or two, enough to release juices.

Remove venison and add wine to skillet, reducing to half volume while scraping pan. Remove pan from heat and reserve liquid for sauce.

Roast venison uncovered 15-20 minutes at 400˚ F until internal temperature of sausage reaches 120˚ F.

Create lingonberry sauce by combining wine reduction to beef stock, plus extra drippings from roasting pan. Mix corn starch in cold water. Stir in corn starch mixture, simmering until desired consistency before adding lingonberry preserves.

Allow meat to rest for several minutes before slicing into 1-inch portions (as illustrated). Serve with lingonberry sauce.

* If a small backstrap is being used (deer less than 100 lbs. dressed weight), use whole backstrap portion uncut.

Italian Sausage-stuffed Venison with Lingonberry Sauce

Squirrel Ravioli

Squirrel Ravioli

Ravioli ingredients:

2-3 squirrels, cleaned (enough to yield 2 cups cooked meat)
vegetable oil
1 tbsp. butter
½ cup diced Spanish onion
fresh, uncooked pasta sheets
1 tbsp. chopped fresh sage (use less if dry; dry sage is more potent)
1 tsp. minced garlic
2 egg yolks, beaten

Sauce ingredients:

1 stick butter
½ cup cream
1 tbsp. minced garlic
1 tbsp. lemon juice
½ cup dry white wine
1 tbsp. chopped sage
salt and pepper to taste

Brush cleaned squirrels with vegetable oil, season with salt and pepper and bake at 400˚ F until meat can be pulled from bones (30-45 minutes).

In a medium skillet, melt butter, then sauté diced onion and sage until onion is tender. Remove from heat and combine sage-onion mixture with squirrel meat removed from bones.

Using a small cookie cutter or scissors, cut uniform-size squares or circles from fresh pasta sheets to create the top and bottom sides of the unfilled raviolis. Brush inside surface with beaten egg yolk (to help the top and bottom layers stick together). Place 1-2 tbsp. of meat mixture on one pasta piece, covering with a second pasta piece, then press edges of filled raviolis together. Drop sealed raviolis into boiling water for 6-8 minutes or until pasta is cooked.

While the past is cooking, prepare the sauce. Melt 1 tbsp. butter in a medium skillet and sauté garlic until softened. Add sage and sauté briefly. Add wine and lemon juice and simmer over medium heat to reduce the liquid to ⅓ original volume. Next add cream and simmer until thickened. Whisk in the remainder of the stick of butter, a few bits at a time, and reduce to desired consistency.

Pour sauce over cooked pasta and serve immediately.

Pan-seared Crappie on Fresh Arugula

20 oz. fresh crappie filets (8-10 filets)
3 tbsp. butter or oil
½ cup all-purpose flour
4 tbsp. white wine vinegar
2 cups cream
1 tbsp. fine diced chives
4 button mushrooms, sliced
salt and pepper to taste
2 bunches arugula

Dust filets in a mixture of flour, salt and pepper. In a hot skillet, add oil or butter. Fry fillets, turning once, until crispy-golden on each side (about 5 minutes).

For sauce, in a medium pan, add cream, white wine vinegar and mushroom slices, simmering until reduced and creamy. Add chives, salt and pepper to taste.

Arrange several leaves of fresh arugula on each salad plate, add 2-3 crappie filets, then drizzle with a generous portion of the warm vinegar-cream sauce. Garnish with chives and/or fresh tomato slices. Serve immediately.

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