Who better to cook up the bounty of nature than the staff of the Illinois Department of Natural Resources?

DNR Chefs Go Wild

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Adele Hodde

Like most office environments, put a few employees together and the conversation eventually turns to food. DNR employees are no different, except, perhaps, that many carry their work-day passion into their private lives, and avidly support harvesting Illinois' natural resources. Whether finned, furry, feather or springing forth from the ground, somewhere within the state's boundaries a DNR person undoubtedly has made an annual ritual to reap the bounties of nature. Here are a few recipes we'd like to share.

Dove or turkey breasts and noodles

Serves 10-12

*Provided by **Gray Pierson**, supervisor, Division of Licenses and Permits, Springfield*

6 cups dove or wild turkey breast meat
1 49.5-ounce can chicken broth
6 cups uncooked extra-wide Amish noodles
3 10.5-ounce cans of cream-of-chicken soup
1 package dry turkey gravy mix
water

Cook cubed meat in chicken broth. Remove breast cubes and add noodles to broth. Cook until al dente and add cream-of-chicken soup and the gravy mix, including the water per package directions. Return meat to noodle mixture, warm through and serve.

Dove or turkey breasts and noodles

Homemade ravioli with grilled deer loin filling

Homemade ravioli with grilled deer loin filling

Serves 10 or more and freezes well

*Provided by **Dean, Quinn and Darlene Corgiat**. Dean is the district heritage biologist for Adams, Hancock, Jersey, Pike and Scott counties*

Ravioli filling:

2 pounds deer loin, cut into thin steaks
½ large onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic, chopped
leaves from one celery heart
½ can spinach, liquid removed
1½ tbsp. parsley
¼ cup Parmesan cheese
¼ to ½ tsp. nutmeg
2 tbsp. butter
1 small package cream cheese, softened
½ cup Italian seasoned bread crumbs
2 eggs
1 pinch rosemary
salt and pepper, to taste

Grill deer loin steaks on grill until rare to medium rare. Allow to cool in refrigerator overnight.

Melt butter in pan and sauté onion, garlic and celery leaves until tender. Put in food processor (or meat grinder) along with deer loin and spinach, running until the meat and onion is finely ground. Remove mixture and place in a large mixing bowl. Add the remaining ingredients and mix well with a fork.

Refrigerate until ready to use.

Ravioli dough

3 cups flour
3 eggs
¼ cup tepid water
2 tbsp. white vinegar
½ cup vegetable oil

Put all ingredients in a large mixing bowl, mix well and then knead the dough for about 10 minutes.

Roll the dough into thin sheets using a rolling pin or pasta rolling machine, moving through the progression of "clicks" to the second from the last setting. Place desired amount of filling at approximately 1-inch intervals in rows spaced approximately 1 inch apart. Roll a second sheet of dough equal in size to the first and lay over the top of the first sheet and filling. Press dough around each filling, being sure to remove all air from between the dough sheets. Using a ravioli cutter or pizza cutter, cut up, down and across all rows to form individual raviolis. (If using a pizza cutter, seal each ravioli by pressing the tines of a fork into the dough around the entire edge of the ravioli.)

Line cookie sheets with waxed paper and place individual raviolis on cookie sheets, being sure raviolis do not touch. When the cookie sheet is full, place in freezer until raviolis are frozen, then remove and place in freezer bags for use as needed.

When ready to use, place raviolis in boiling water and cook until desired tenderness is reached. Place on plate and cover with sauce.

Deer spaghetti sauce

1 lb. ground deer burger
1 medium onion, chopped
4-6 garlic cloves, crushed
1 29-ounce can tomato puree
1 6-ounce can tomato paste
1 1-lb., 12-ounce can diced tomatoes
1 tsp. oregano
6-10 leaves fresh basil, torn
2 tbsp. sugar
¼ cup water
¼ cup Chianti wine (optional)
salt and pepper, to taste

Brown meat in skillet with onions and add two cloves of crushed garlic. Place in crock pot and add the remainder of the ingredients except salt and pepper. Stir, set crock pot on low and cook for 6-8 hours. During the last 1-2 hours, remove the lid and let cook. Add salt and pepper to your taste preference and serve over your choice of pasta.

Blackberry jam

*Provided by **Deb Singer**, an office administrator in the Director's office*

Moving to the country, I taught myself to make jams because of all the wild berries on our property.

5 cups crushed blackberries
1 package (1.75 ounces) powdered pectin
7 cups sugar

Bring berries and pectin to a rolling boil. Add sugar. Return to a boil and boil for 1 minute. Skim off foam. Ladle into prepared jars and process in a water bath for 15 minutes.

Blackberry jam

Squirrel "baby backs"

Squirrel "baby backs"

Serves 4

***Tim Krumwiede** is the district wildlife biologist for Adams, Brown, Hancock, Pike, Schuyler and Scott counties.*

16 squirrel "loins"
1 cup red cooking wine
1 cup sweet pickle juice
1 cup flour
1 cup ground corn tortilla chips
salt and coarse ground black pepper, to taste
¼ cup soy sauce
½ cup vegetable oil

Marinate squirrel pieces in refrigerator for 12 hours, or longer, in a 50/50 mix of wine and pickle juice, using enough to cover the squirrel pieces. Combine equal amounts of ground tortilla chips with flour, seasoning to taste with salt and pepper. Drain the squirrel pieces, pat dry, and roll in flour/chip mixture. Lightly brown the squirrel in oil on the stove or in an electric skillet. Place pieces in crock pot on an elevated rack, adding a small amount of water beneath the rack. Generously apply soy sauce and cook on low for 4-6 hours, depending on crock pot temperature and size of squirrel backs.