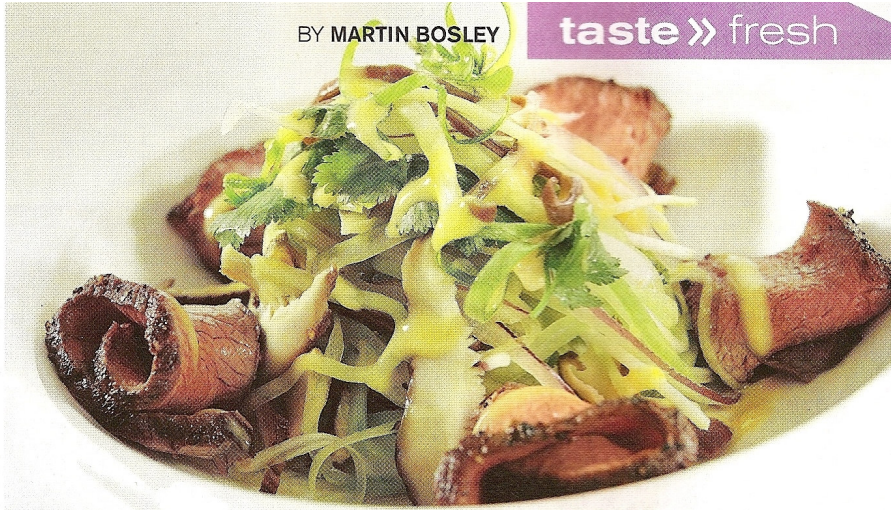


BY MARTIN BOSLEY

taste » fresh



the name of the game

Farmed venison, marketed as Cervena, is now a perennial New Zealand restaurant favourite.

IN THE EARLY years of the modern restaurant industry, crayfish and venison often made their way onto restaurant menus like this: on Saturday afternoons there would be a knock at the kitchen door, and on the other side was either a diver, still damp, holding a hessian sack full of "crays", or someone resembling a character from *The Lord of the Rings* holding a haunch of venison. Much haggling over quality and price would ensue. It was, of course, illegal and big fines were imposed on offending restaurants.

One rainy Saturday, government officials looking for illegal game meats raided the restaurant I was working at. Our woolly, feral-smelling and dishevelled hunter had just dropped off our weekly delivery of illegal venison. The restaurant owner delayed the inspectors while the head chef and I raced up the external fire escape to hide the heavy haunches of venison. Chef was in front of me when he slipped on the greasy metal steps. In slow motion he tumbled sideways, pulled over the railing by the weight of the meat he was carrying, smashed through the windows of the kitchen, bounced off the larder bench and landed at the feet of the inspectors, the venison leg cushioning his fall. Not long after, chef and I were unemployed and the restaurant owner had sold his Rolls Royce.

Back then we would break down the haunches or loins of venison, its meat a glorious dark red, into various cuts and marinate them in a heady mixture of wine, herbs, spices and vegetables for three to

seven days. This was done to tenderise and to soften the intense gaminess of the meat.

Today, we get our venison legally in handy packets; aged, trimmed and broken down into a wide variety of cuts and muscles, with little or no marinating required. This is because we use the trademarked brand Cervena.

I am frequently asked what the difference is between Cervena venison and other types. Well, Cervena has a fine-grained texture and a mild but distinctive taste that is not too gamey. The rules around what Cervena is are strict: the deer must be farm-raised in natural pastures, grass-fed and supplemented with natural feed, with no hormones or steroids. It must also be three years old or younger.

A wide variety of cuts are available, making any number of dishes possible. In autumn I like to pair venison with the rich and aromatic flavours of mushrooms; in winter it's slow-cooked, in deeply satisfying braised dishes like Osso Bucco. In spring I look to roasting or grilling the meat, and in summer I use it in salads, or straight off the barbecue. I think it is at its most succulent when roasted or grilled to medium-rare (note that due to its dark colour, venison looks rare when cooked medium-rare and is actually overcooked if it looks medium).

I sometimes miss those Saturday afternoons, when hunters and divers would appear at the kitchen door, in true hunter-gatherer fashion. I don't miss the stress, though, of trying to look casual and innocent with a leg of venison over my shoulder. ☞