From Forest to Food Bank

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BURGETTSTOWN, Pa. — Tyler Young is walking back to the scene of the kill. It's a frigid morning in the woods, less than 25 miles to the west of Pittsburgh, and he is a blaze of neon orange against a white backdrop, with a thousand-dollar rifle jutting off his back. As he reaches into his pocket to show what brought down a 170-pound doe, the 30.06 shell drops to the ground. He immediately bends down and scrabbles in the thick snow to retrieve it. Young and his stepfather, Bill Young, have used the same box of shells for 10 years, ritualistically refilling them, and this one cannot be lost.

What you could almost call spirituality is much of what matters in hunting to Tyler Young, who is 23 but looks barely old enough to need a razor. He first hit the woods at 12, bonding with his outdoors-loving stepfather, and has bagged one deer nearly every year since. A deer will keep the family in

steaks and chops and chili for the winter. They prize the meat, he says, for the “pride in eating something you killed or claimed.”

Increasingly, though, hunters like the Youngs are starting to believe that it may not be enough to assert “We eat what we kill,” that maybe it’s better to share than to just freeze. With income inequality growing and a four-legged population exploding — Pennsylvania alone is overrun with 1.4 million deer — venison is coming to be seen as the meat of the future for food pantries and soup kitchens across the United States. A large national network has evolved to connect hunters with the hungry. Almost every state now has a program designed to simultaneously address deer as both tick-bearing, garden-devouring, car-endangering pests and an answer for the growing number of Americans in need of high-quality protein. According to the National Rifle Association, hunters donated 2.6 million pounds of venison nationwide in 2010 (the most recent year for which statistics are available). In Pennsylvania, which some call the “huntingest” state, the nonprofit Hunters Sharing the Harvest has been supplying venison to food banks and soup kitchens since 1991. There’s just one little challenge: How do you convert a deer into dinner?

Tyler Young, 23, who has been hunting since he was 12, is very careful to know what’s ahead before he brings his rifle to his eye.

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Butchering and packaging

Just to the east of the snow where Young retraced his steps, in the little town with the big name of Carnegie, Kip Padgelek is hunched over his laptop in Kip's Deer Processing, the busy business he runs out of the garage of his split-level home. It's a USDA-approved slaughterhouse that is ground zero in the Allegheny County, Pa., movement to turn does and bucks into sustenance for the needy. With a wall of mounted deer heads over his shoulder, he's going over orders from the hundreds of hunters who have been pulling up to his driveway and hauling in their trophies since archery season opened in the fall. His goal is to persuade them to think beyond hamburgers and hot dogs, habanero jerky and cheese Slim Jims for their own use. What about sharing with the less fortunate, those who cannot afford even a $20 hunting license, let alone a thousand-dollar gun?

Source: Al Jazeera reporting

For five years Padgelek has served on the board of Hunters Sharing the Harvest. His philosophy: "Hunger is out there, and it happens. You can walk by it every day, or you can do something. No one is immune from catastrophe." The 14,000 pounds of venison he collects in a given year makes his the largest donation in the state to the network, which supplies 4,000 charitable food outlets.

Padgelek normally charges $65 to decapitate, skin, bone and process a deer but only $15 when a deer is donated — just enough to cover his overhead. But the fee is still too high for some would-be donors. Bill Young donated a deer once, then decided it was unfair to have to pay for processing after having already given his time, his bullet, his licensing fee and the energy it took to field-dress (gut, in layman's terms) the strapping buck.

But this year, Consol Energy chipped in $50,000 to cover the processing fees. The company originated with coal in 1864 and is now awash in money from fracking Marcellus shale, which lies under many of the game lands where hunters like the Youngs and Padgelek stalk their deer. With the donation, says Padgelek, hunters "can actually bring a deer and not have to pay anything at all and donate it. And we're seeing a pretty good response for that this year."

A bigger hope was that the infusion of Consol cash would encourage more butchers to join the network and get certified by the USDA so they could donate to food banks — and make some money too.

"We've got 118 butchers across the state" in the network, Padgelek says. "We get probably between 80,000 and 100,000 pounds of deer meat donated through those butchers to the food banks. And we're not even scratching the surface. We're between 1 and 3 percent of the venison that's harvested for this state. So we can only go one way: up."

As Padgelek is talking, barrel-chested Richard Adams of nearby Moon Township arrives at Kip's dragging the two deer that he, his son and a friend bagged on that snowy Saturday. One would be processed to give to another friend, the other to Hunters Sharing the Harvest. Adams, raised as a Catholic to share, always donates his first catch.

"I think they could use the meat more than myself," says the gruff but soft-eyed Adams. He speaks while standing outside in the frigid early evening darkness as hunter after hunter heads up the driveway lugging a gutted deer by the antlers or legs. "I mean, there's a lot of people that really appreciate that meat. I never take it for granted either. When I kill an animal, I always take a moment and think about it. You are taking a life. When it goes to the hunter-share program, it's all worthwhile."

The mood at the processor is harvest festive. Everyone who has bagged a deer is buoyant, and none expresses qualms about watching his kill being ground up for food. "Everyone believes that McDonald's hamburger was raised to be a hamburger," says one hunter. "This is accountability," says another. "Hunters are the best conservationists."

Once you see how the meat gets into the packaging at Kip's, it's easy to imagine it passing for ground round. The gutted deer carcasses stacked outside are unsettling, perhaps, but once the hides and heads are removed and the bodies are hanging in a cooler, you could mistake them for

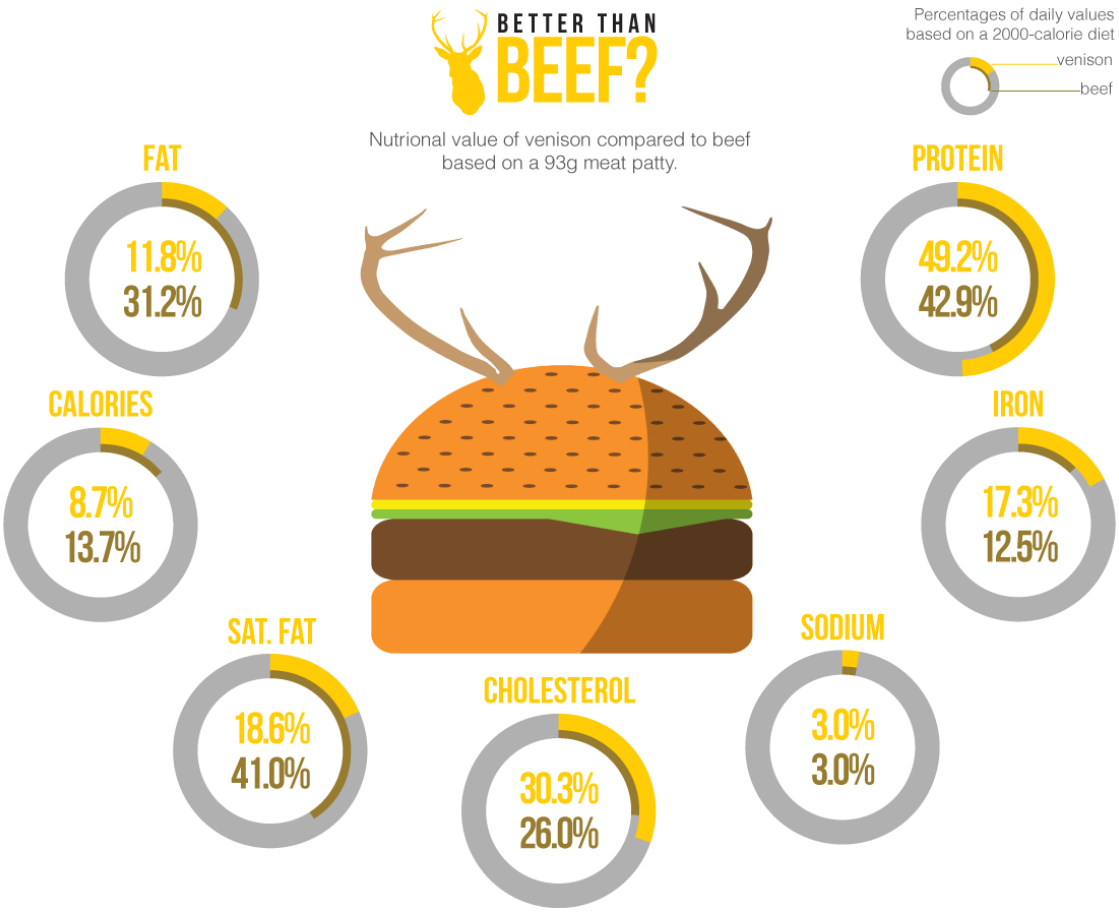
lamb. Over the next days, the meat is broken down into steaks and chops and then chunks to be ground. The maroon meat is sent through a grinder twice, emerging a healthy sirloin red, then transferred to a hydraulic stuffer to be pumped into plastic casings. The more it's processed, the more it looks like food — all-American meat.

Richard Adams, left, and a hunting companion head up the driveway at Kip's Deer Processing, ready to donate one of their catch to Hunters Sharing the Harvest.

'We need more deer and more donors'

Once the deer has been transformed, Padgelek takes the donated venison to four outlets in Pittsburgh because he believes charity should stay close to home. Other processors supply the Westmoreland County Food Bank, east of Pittsburgh, as well as farther-flung food banks across Pennsylvania, in Erie and Philadelphia and dozens of towns in between.

At Westmoreland, the ground meat looks like a drop in the freezer — two bins dwarfed by pallets of other groceries stacked to the ceiling.



Source: FDA and U.S. Department of Agriculture

Still, Jennifer Miller, the food bank's development director, says every little bit counts, especially this time of year. "There's that overwhelming surge of people that come for the holidays. And we don't always have enough protein items to be able to give them. We need more deer and more donors."

The need is especially dire this year, since federal food aid was cut at the beginning of November. Further reductions mean "food banks will have to grow 50 percent overnight," Miller says. "And there's no possible way that that could happen."

According to the NRA, donated game provided about 10 million meals nationwide in 2010. (A single deer yields enough meat for 200.) But at least 47 million people are dependent on food stamps for meals every day of the year. In this pocket of Pennsylvania, at least 1 in 6 residents needs help.

‘When I kill an animal, I always take a moment and think about it. You are taking a life. When it goes to the hunter-share program, it’s all worthwhile.’

— richard adams

Jubilee Kitchen in the Hill District, one of the poorest parts of Pittsburgh, is a haven for the hungry, especially on a snowy Sunday.

A Delicacy

In Pittsburgh, Robert, a Vietnam veteran on disability, has just finished his second heaping helping of venison casserole at Jubilee Kitchen in one of the poorest parts of the city. Wearing an impressive fur hat, he took two buses and limped the rest of the way on his cane to get to this free lunch on a snowy Sunday in early December.

What he ate and carried out of this gritty soup kitchen was something even the most connected chef in a highly rated restaurant would never be able serve: wild venison. By law, only meat from farmed

deer may be sold; the 1 percent have to settle for tame game, usually imported from New Zealand, when they want to indulge ($65 for venison loin at the Four Seasons in New York City). But donated deer is a different story.

The presentation might not have been four star, with the ground meat — foraged, in a sense, from just miles away — baked in a casserole, served with either rice or stuffing and scooped onto prison-style divided trays, with scavenged fruits, vegetables, breads and cakes rounding out the menu. The clientele would never be mistaken for masters of the universe. Some arrived hours early with all their belongings in rolling suitcases. None removed their coats or hats to eat. But all of them were being nourished with what many consider a delicacy — and essential protein. Jubilee collects donations of breads and cakes from bakeries, fruits and vegetables on the turn from Whole Foods. Meat is always harder to come by.

Mark Saucier, the ebullient volunteer who has run Jubilee Kitchen on weekends since 1999, says his regulars are typical: not just the homeless and the mentally ill but also minimum-wage workers, disabled veterans and even families. Looking out at the small crowd seated in their coats and hats at long tables, he adds, “There’s no black or white here. There’s only an income level.”

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>
> — kip padgelek

On that Sunday, he fed about 125 people with Hunters Sharing the Harvest’s ground venison from Kip’s, about half as many as usual because it was early in the month, before government benefits run out. (The weekend before, he served 500 donated deer dogs.) And while Saucier once had to pass off the venison as “Allegheny beef,” today he can call it what it is, and the clientele happily eats it. It helps, of course, that the meat no longer arrives on the bone. He used to have to cook it in pots, with the protruding legs camouflaged by aluminum foil.

Robert, tucking a quart takeout container of venison casserole into his bag after lunch, proclaimed it not only delicious but enough to keep him satiated until the following Sunday. “When you’re not hungry, you can think about the future, not just the present.” ◆