

VENISON PIE

When I'm holed up in the countryside I like to cook as simply as possible, partly because in the most remote village shops asking for cumin or olive oil can get you the same look as wearing a leotard in the high street. The following ingredients shouldn't raise any eyebrows. Use the shoulder or leg for this recipe as the saddle is too lean and should be kept for cooking rare. I don't like swamping deer meat in boozy marinades as the taste gets lost. Leave the lid off and make a good stew.

Serves 4-6

1kg shoulder or leg of red deer venison
40g dripping
2 large onions, peeled and finely diced
1 heaped tablespoon plain flour
1 teaspoon English mustard powder
4 medium carrots, peeled and diced
1 x 500ml can dark ale
1 tablespoon soft brown sugar
3 tablespoons malt vinegar

a heavy grating of nutmeg
1 big sprig of fresh thyme
large-flaked sea salt and a good blast of
black pepper
2 ginger biscuits

TOPPING

1 portion rough puff pastry (*see page 249*)
plain flour, for dusting
1 medium egg, beaten with 1 tablespoon
milk

Have the butcher cut the venison into proper over-sized mouthfuls that might need cutting once on your plate, as these cook better than small chunks.

Preheat the oven to 180°C/350°F/Gas 4. Heat the dripping in a large, lidded flameproof casserole on the hob and add the onions, frying them until they are soft and browned. Turn off the heat and sift the flour and mustard powder into the pot. Stir until you have a thickish onion mix. Add the meat and carrots and stir into the onions. (You are not pre-browning the meat, as with venison this makes it clench like a fist.) Add the ale, sugar, vinegar, nutmeg, thyme and pepper, and both ginger biscuits, finely grated. Stir once more. Do not add any salt; you'll do this at the end. Cover the contents of the pot with a circle of neatly cut greaseproof and put the lid on, then cook it in the preheated oven for 1½ hours. When the time is up, add a tablespoon of salt.

Transfer the contents of the casserole to a pie dish. Use a deep dish, as a wide shallow one will have the pie crust drooping in the middle, thus becoming soggy. Turn the temperature of the oven up to 200°C/400°F/Gas 6.

Roll your pastry out to a thickness of about 7mm and lay it over your unctuous deer filling. Leave a slight overhang and crimp the edges with a fork. Paint the top of your pie evenly with the beaten egg and milk. This is the time to fashion any pastry motif appropriate to the occasion and place it on top. Prick a hole in the middle of the pastry, no larger than a wren's eye.

Cook for 40-45 minutes, until the pastry is a rich hazelnut brown. If in doubt, cook a little longer, as pale, soggy pastry is not as pleasing. Dive in.

