

Venison Pierogis

FILLING

- 3 tablespoons butter, lard, duck fat, or the cooking oil of your choice
- 2 pounds venison shoulder, shank meat, or neck meat
- Salt and black pepper
- 1 teaspoon caraway seed
- 2 celery stalks, chopped
- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 carrot, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- A handful of dried mushrooms
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- A 12-ounce bottle of dark malty beer, such as stout, porter, or a brown ale
- 1½ cups venison or beef stock
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch

DOUGH

- 2 large eggs
- ½ cup sour cream (4 ounces)
- 3 tablespoons melted butter (unsalted)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup all-purpose flour (4¼ ounces)
- 1 cup dark rye flour or pumpernickel flour (3¾ ounces)

Heat the butter in a heavy, lidded pot large enough to hold the venison. Salt the meat well and brown it on all sides. Don't crowd the pot, and do this in batches if need be. As the venison browns, remove it from the pot and set aside.

Add the vegetables and cook over medium heat until they begin to brown on the edges, about 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the tomato paste, then add the Worcestershire sauce, beer, and about ½ cup of broth.

Return the meat to the pot and add more stock until it comes halfway up the sides of the meat. Cover the pot and simmer gently over medium-low heat until the meat is very tender. This could be anywhere from 90 minutes to 3 hours, depending on how old your animal was.

When the meat is ready, shred it roughly. Put 1 cup of this meat in a food processor and add 2 tablespoons of cooking liquid. Pulse until coarsely ground.

Depending on what sort of cuts you use, you may have extra meat. You can eat the rest of the meat as a cook's snack, or drop it into soup. Strain the cooking liquid and reserve it to make gravy later. All of this can be done up to a day or two before you make the pierogis.

To make the dough, mix 1 egg, the sour cream, and melted butter into one bowl, and the remaining ingredients into another bowl. Stir the wet into the dry, then knead until the dough comes together—this should only take a minute or three. Cover the dough and let it rest for 15 minutes.

Cut the dough in half. Cover one half while you work with the other. Roll the dough into a snake and cut it into 12 pieces. Roll each piece into a ball and set aside, covered. Repeat with the second half of the dough.

Ideally you have a tortilla press; they are cheap and available online or in any Mexican market. It makes the process of forming all sorts of dumpling wrappers (and, of course, tortillas) so much easier it's worth the \$20. If you have one, line the press with cut pieces of a heavy plastic bag (like a freezer bag) and press each ball of dough into a flat disk.

If you don't have a tortilla press, flatten each ball of dough with your hands, keeping it as round as possible. Finish rolling the wrappers out on a well-floured surface with a rolling pin. You want them as thin as possible, like 1/8 inch. Alternately, you can roll the whole batch of dough out thin and cut out 3-inch circles with a cookie cutter.

Beat the remaining egg for the dough with some water to make an egg wash. Get a baking sheet out and either line it with parchment paper or dust it with semolina flour or cornmeal.

Fill each circle with about a heaping tablespoon of the venison. Using your finger, swipe a little bit of the egg wash along the edge of the dough circle, then fold the dough over the filling to make a half moon. Seal the dumplings with your fingers and set them on the baking sheet.

When you're done, you have a choice: Fry your pierogis or boil them. If you boil them, get a large pot of water boiling and add enough salt to make the water taste a little salty. Boil the pierogis until they float, then boil a minute or two more. If you fry them, get a wide frying pan and add 3 or 4 tablespoons of your favorite fat—duck fat and butter are mine—and fry the pierogis over medium-high heat in one layer until nicely browned, about 2 minutes.

You can eat them all this way, with sour cream and caramelized onions, or you can make a gravy with your cooking liquid by heating it up to steaming, then adding the cornstarch. To do this without clumping, mix the cornstarch with about 1 tablespoon of water to make a slurry, then stir it into the hot liquid. Keep stirring, and bring the gravy to a boil. That will set the corn starch. Drop the heat back to a simmer and you're ready.

