

YUCATÁN: A CULINARY EXPEDITION

INGREDIENTS



VENADO, CIERVO ROJO

Botanical name

Odocoileus virginianus yucatanensis, *Cervus elaphus*

Mayan name

Kéeb

Common English names

White-tailed deer, *Red deer*

Etymology

- *Venado* derives from the Latin *venor*, “to hunt”. In Spanish, *venado* refers both to the animal and to its meat, or “venison.” *Ciervo* is from the Latin word *cervus* meaning “deer”, and *rojo* is the Spanish adjective “red”.
- *Odocoileus* derives from the Greek noun *odous* or *odontis* – “tooth”. *Coileus* derives from the Greek adjective *koilos* which means “hollow.” Therefore, *Odocoileus* means “hollow-toothed”.
 - *Cervus* and *elaphus* are both Latin words for “deer”.
- *White-tailed deer* owes its name to the fact that when threatened, the deer flips its tail straight up, revealing the white fur underneath, to signal danger to others.

History and heritage

The distribution of the white-tailed deer extends from Canada southward into South America. However, *Odocoileus virginianus yucatanensis* is a subspecies unique to the Yucatán peninsula. Smaller than its North American relatives, it measures only three feet tall and weighs just 70-80 pounds at maturity. They are principally grazing animals, depending on the tips of trees and shrubs. The Yucatecan white-tailed deer is preyed upon by pumas and jaguars, but by far its most dangerous enemy is man. Venado has been such a perennial favorite in the Mayan diet that it has been hunted to the point of near extinction. Government regulations have protected the species, and now in Yucatán only those men from the poorest pueblos are allowed to hunt them, and then only for their own consumption: selling the meat to anyone results in fines. But the demand for venison on Yucatecan tables continues unabated, such that new solutions are being tested. Starting in 1994, the domesticated New Zealand red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) was introduced into Yucatán. Deer are not native to New Zealand; instead, the first deer were shipped there from England and Scotland for sport in the mid-19th century. By the mid-20th century feral deer were regarded as a pest because of their impact on native forests. The export of venison from feral deer turned a pest into a gold mine. Industry pioneers saw an opportunity to build on this base and in the early '70s started capturing live deer from the wild and farming them. A new industry was born and spread rapidly throughout New Zealand. This same industry is gaining inroads in Yucatán, finding successful adaptation in the entire peninsula and south into Chiapas.

Culinary uses

To the meat-eating Europeans, the Mayan vegetarian diet seemed something akin to Lent – perpetual denial. Of course the Maya ate flesh, but it was consumed much less frequently than the staples of corn, beans and squash.

When it came to elites, however, the story changes a little. Animal bones are found in Mayan elite graves, and among them are quantities of deer bones, revealing that even in ancient times, deer was a favorite food. Fray Diego de Landa – the Franciscan monk who reported Mayan customs and history at the time of the conquest – recorded a recipe for a ritual offering stew made with venison and *chacmole*, which is a sauce of *achiote*, chile, allspice and tomato. Other sources report venison served in sauces thickened with maize dough, known as *k'ool*, or thickened with toasted ground pumpkin seeds, known as *óom sikil* in Maya or *pipián* in Spanish. Most of these ancient recipes have survived with only minimal modification into modern times. *Tsi'ik de Venado*, *venado en pipián rojo* and *venado en sackool* can still be found on local restaurant menus. And today, thanks to the introduction of the New Zealand red deer, the chances are greater that you will actually be eating venison instead of the typical substitute: beef.