

WHAT'S A WAPITI? and who will buy it?



Wapiti bulls at Evan Meredith's Wapiti Park

by Peter Dratch

Peter Dratch has recently returned from three months in the United States where he has been writing about scientific subjects for a daily newspaper. He returned to Invermay's animal production unit in time to be present at the birth of his first child, an American Kiwi named Lisa who not only had a large birth weight but has shown a rapid growth rate.

ON OCTOBER 29, the NZ Wapiti Society was launched in the small Southland town of Winton. While it is not surprising that few Americans

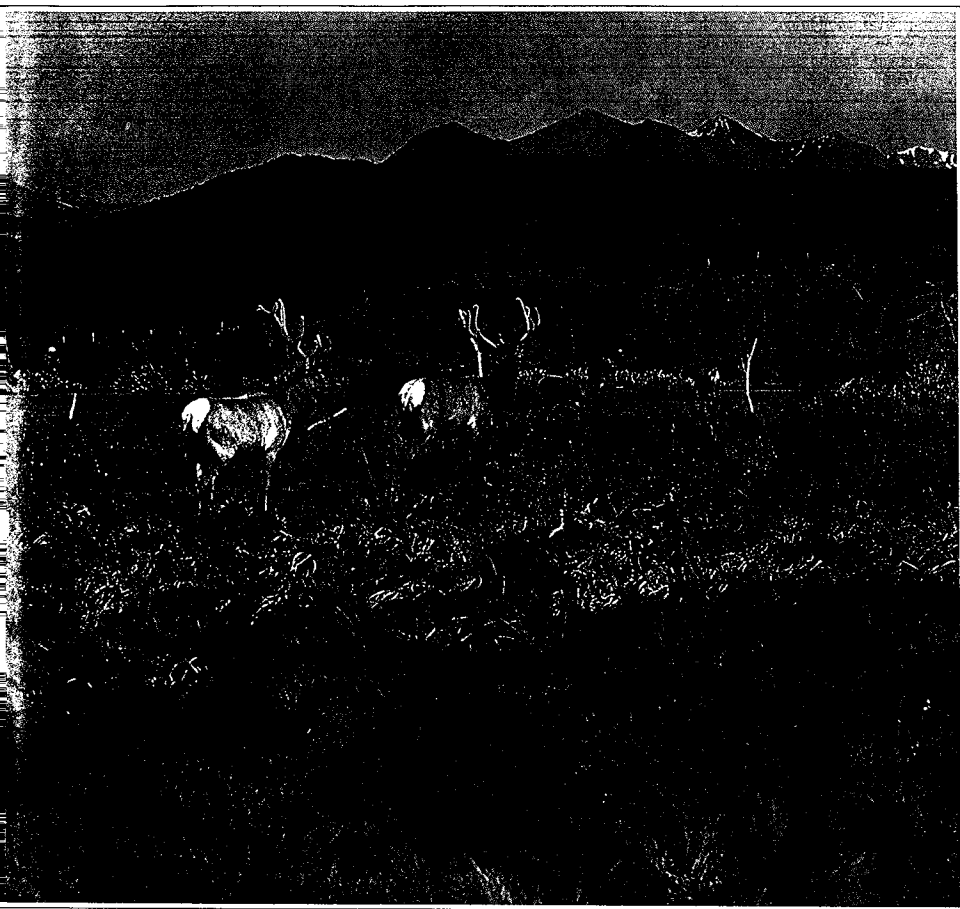
have heard of Winton, not many more will have heard of Wapiti. Those select few that could tell you what a Wapiti is would mostly be

wildlife biologists, hardly your regular patrons of white-tableclothed restaurants.

In the United States, this majestic cervid is an Elk, and the North American Indian name Wapiti demonstrates just one of the problems marketers will have in selling deer to the American public.

If Wapiti drew a blank among those I spoke to in the United States, their reaction to venison was generally negative. I asked a wide variety of people if they had tried venison and

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if they had what was their impression of the meat. While hardly a random sample, the responses I got confirmed what I guessed about the reputation of deer meat over there.

Those people who had tried venison had not had it in restaurants, and thought of it as having a strong gamey taste, a dark colour and often a tough texture. One lady said to me that she would rate it with rattlesnake. So why did they eat it in the first place? Often it was obligatory, as it was wheeled out with

pride by the hunter who shot it.

When I spoke to Rick Vidgen, head of the Ram Group doing market research on venison in the United States, and marketing executive Nickola Blunt of the Game Industry Board, they confirmed that the scientific survey had come to the same conclusion. Americans may be adventurous in trying new tastes, but venison begins with a reputation that is far from favourable.

I think it is worth noting that there are good biological reasons behind

this bias. Though venison can refer to any deer meat, in the United States it is usually associated with White-tails and Black-tails, by far the most numerous of the deer species there. These are small-bodied deer, most in the same size range as the Fallow here, and they mature in just a couple of years. This means that many sexually mature animals are shot and served.

Moreover, the deer hunting season in many states is clumped into just a few weeks in November, well into the ▷

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▷ northern hemisphere autumn. Not only are these animals shot after the rut, but also they have faced the assault of an army of sportsmen. This is the image venison conjures up in North America, not some serene paddock with Red deer grazing behind fences. Little wonder that many people have no taste for venison before they have tried it.

That is the problem, but what is the solution to creating a receptive market in North America for NZ deer? I am a scientist not a marketer, but I found some possible answers from an unexpected source.

Last January I received a letter from a geology professor of the New England college I attended a decade ago. He was leading a group of alumni on a tour of New Zealand. Since I was one of only two Amherst alumni living in the country, he asked that I meet the group and explain my research here.

Since the group was not coming to Dunedin I met them in Te Anau for the rendezvous, never missing the opportunity to get to Fiordland when I get the chance. I explained that it was my research in deer genetics that brought me to New Zealand. They were so interested to learn that the deer in the mountains across the lake were not native but originally from the United States, that I gave Evan Meredith a call and arranged for us to have a tour of Wapiti Park before continuing on their schedule to Doubtful Sound.

Few could have sold New Zealand deer in such a natural and appealing way as Evan did that next morning.

Though these tourists were awed at a close-up look at the deer of Wapiti Park, it did not keep many of them from choosing venison on their hotel menu that night.

What were those adventurous ones served? Two pieces of dark meat, each no higher or larger than a MacDonald's hamburger, islands in a brown sauce that looked like gravy. The takers were polite, but hardly enthusiastic.

After I said goodbye the next day and the American alumni group boarded their bus, I stopped in at Te Anau's small gourmet restaurant, Kepler's. Though venison was not on the menu, the managing chef told me that he did sometimes feature it. Trained in the European tradition, he always prepared a complementary sauce. But this chef had learned. When they detected American accents, his staff asked how they

preferred their meat cooked. Medium rare was the most common answer, with the sauce on the side.

Annabel Langbein, in her article on venison preparation in the last issue of *The Deer Farmer*, makes the point. With a high quality product, the less cooking time and marinating the better. Many hotel chefs are still using the methods used to counteract the flavour of shot game on farmed deer. And though the Game Industry Board sponsored Ms Langbein, their brochure which precedes her article falls into the same trap.

Though it states that one of venison's great attributes is that it is low in fat, its pages show lovely pictures of creamy pate and terrine, meatballs and salami. The people who can afford venison are not dumb. They know this stuff is prepared with the salt and fat that is off limits.

In fairness to the Game Industry Board, one of the purposes of the promotion was to show how appetising lower priced cuts can be prepared for the local market. It was not attempting to address why American tourists often don't find a simple venison steak which they can rave about at home.

What does this have to do with Wapiti? Given that many Americans prefer their meat simply prepared and venison has negative connotations, perhaps Wapiti is the product to use in introducing New Zealand deer to the United States. Not called Wapiti, of course, but Elk. Elk not only carries with it a readily identifiable animal of the American west, the product itself may have some favourable attributes.

One major obstacle for venison in new markets is its dark red colour. People associate paler meat with tenderness, often with good reason. You need look no further than the difference between lamb and mutton, or veal and old bull. If animals have not been subject to pre-slaughter stress — a condition that makes tight quality control crucial — younger carcasses will usually be lighter in colour.

It is not absolute age which probably makes meat darken, however, but how far along the animal is in the trip to sexual maturity. Because Wapiti are larger and mature later, their meat is often lighter than Red deer slaughtered at the same age. When two 10 month old males were dressed out at the field day in Winton, this is what the deer farmers saw for

themselves. Though it may be the meat of cowboys rather than kings, the salmon-coloured Wapiti cuts looked superb.

More fundamental research needs to be done, but Ken Drew has had the vision to bring an American food technologist, Dennis Seman, to Invermay to do this type of work.

Trying to market Elk in the United States is not without some problems, as I learned when I was there. Some strong conservation groups oppose the farming of any game animals, and some wildlife departments see Elk becoming widespread in restaurants as an invitation to poachers to bring illegal kills in through the back door.

Conservation groups can be clearly answered, as deer farming in New Zealand continues to be a positive conservation policy. The helicopters need only stay on the ground for a few years and we will have unfortunate proof enough. Hopefully it will not come to that and the story which Evan Meredith told so well that morning can find a spokesman abroad.

There is also an answer for state wildlife departments, rightly concerned about poaching. New Zealand Elk, or perhaps Wapiti Elk, is not North American Elk. It is a farmed hybrid which exists nowhere in the wild in America. Not only can it be product branded, but if necessary the Red deer genes which we find in the blood can be isolated in the red meat. Precisely the same monitoring methods were used by Australia to confirm that the meat they were exporting to the United States was beef and not kangaroo.

Before I returned to New Zealand I made a stop in Grand Teton National Park to give a talk at the science school there and to meet Mardy Murie. Mardy knows Wapiti. She and her husband Olaus wrote "Wapiti Wilderness" describing that magnificent Yellowstone-Teton region.

As we talked in her log house, she fondly recalled her time in New Zealand when Olaus led the Fiordland expedition and first documented the hybridisation of Red deer and Elk in that southern hemisphere wilderness. After all the controversy which has accompanied the Fiordland Wapiti, and still does, I couldn't help but think it would be appropriate for the descendants of those wild ambassadors to introduce New Zealand deer to America. □