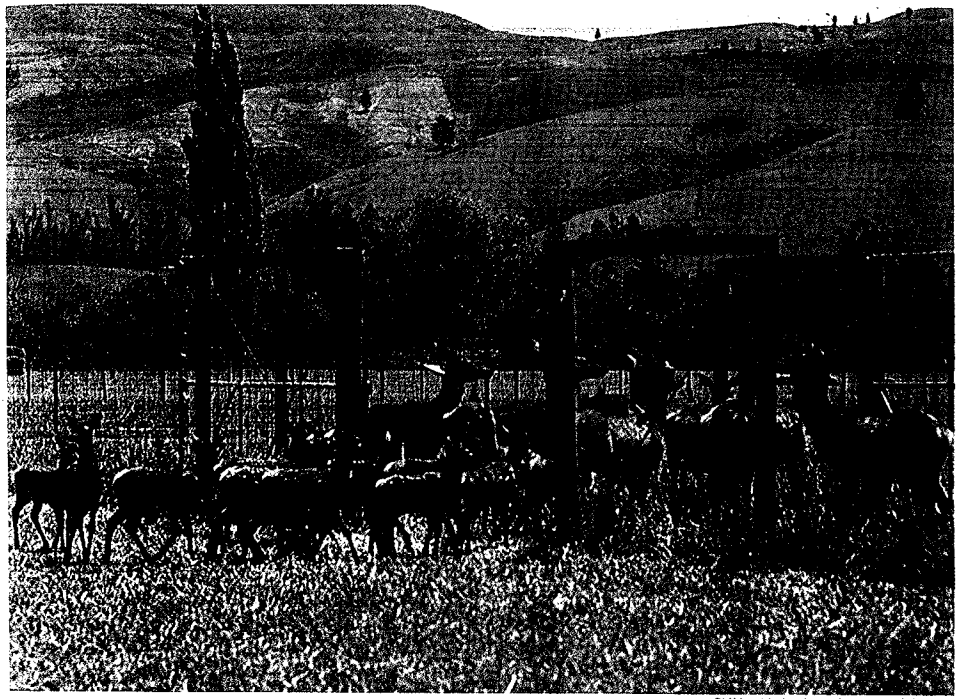


Shifting hinds with their young at Invermay

A brand new industry... New Zealand farmed deer

by K. R. Drew

Does the idea of *Selle de Chevreuil Saint-Hubert* bring your salivary glands vigorously into action?

The chances are, however, that repeat orders of the *Saint-Hubert* or any other venison delicacy will produce as many different eating experiences. The reason is not hard to find: on one occasion you may be eating a succulent steak from a tender young calf; on another a fine old stag who has rounded up many a harem during the "roar" and fought hard battles over mating rights.

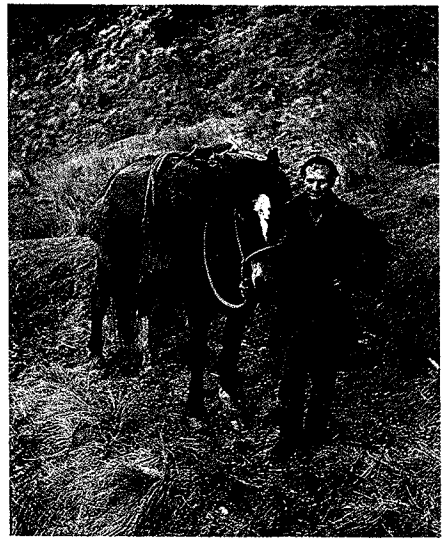
Fifteen years ago New Zealand's export venison quite likely came from a back-country hunter who shot the animals in the mountains, cleaned them by a stream of clear glacier-fed water, transported the meat by packhorse to an insect-proof safe at the end of a rough runway, where, at irregular intervals, an aircraft would lurch its way onto the ground, pick up the carcases to take them to one of several small packing houses. Many carcasses arrived in poor condition and the meat, although often thoroughly "aged", could hardly be called a high quality product.

The picture may be changing: some innovative New Zealand farmers are learning how to fence, manage and herd the feral deer. The idea began about ten years ago with one or two farmers receiving permits to hold deer. Some of this interest was aimed at having animals on view for the tourist trade. During the last few years, several people have suddenly seen that deer not only survive on a farm but, in fact, reproduce well, grow at a remarkable rate and, even better still, command a high return for their meat.

Exports: Most of our wild or feral venison goes to Germany, where hunting is confined to a small group who can afford to pay high fees for the sport. Such is the popularity for venison in that country that special game meat regulations apply to allow entry of our exports, and this on a continent that strongly protects the home producer of red meat.

In early 1975 new regulations were passed in Germany aimed at upgrading the hygiene of imported game meat. These included a higher standard of meat handling and inspection at packing houses; a defined period of 10 hours between shooting a deer and placing the carcass into a chiller, and the presentation of heart, liver, lungs and kidneys, identified with the carcass, at the packing plant.

To comply with these requirements, New Zealand also passed new game regulations that recognised two classes of deer carcasses: "kill" deer, those animals shot in the wild, where no ante-mortem inspection was possible, and "slaughter" deer, or farmed deer for which a veterinary inspection was possible before slaughter. "Slaughter" deer carcases are eligible for consumption within



Right: A deer hunter in days of yore leads his pack horse

Below: Stags at Invermay in the spring

New Zealand or for export to several countries whose regulations prohibit the import of "kill" deer.

Stock: Breeding stock for farms can come from some mountainous areas of New Zealand which have natural reservoirs of deer. The deer are trapped, or shot with tranquiliser darts. These "extensive" properties provide young stock to flat lands farmers who have the pasture to grow the calves to satisfactory weights. Some of the most productive farms are those on good quality agricultural land where high stock density is possible.

The unknowing could think that hand reared "tame" deer are the most suitable animals to farm. Not so. Tame stags in the roar are nothing short of lethal. They move

very fast, are incredibly agile and have not the slightest regard for man's ability in close combat. One stag badly mauled a heavyweight car whose occupants had annoyed him. He smashed the headlights, tailights, beat on the roof, engine and luggage compartment before putting his antlers through the car into the upholstery! (The occupants had, of course, fled by this time). Even tame hinds can become vicious with their front feet. As long as the deer are not hand-reared they hold a natural fear of man and are less likely to cause trouble in handling operations.

Feed Control: New Zealand's traditional management on sheep and cattle farms use low cost systems where the animals harvest their own feed from pastures. Because grass growth is seasonal, domesticated species are fed conserved feed, in some form, during periods of low pasture growth. This is expensive. But the feed requirements of deer look attractive to our farming methods because there seems to be a seasonal appetite control which has developed over many centuries to protect the deer from massive winter death rate.

At the Invermay Agricultural Research Centre near Dunedin, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries is conducting the first full scale deer farming research project to provide information for the new industry. It is apparent deer at the centre dramatically reduce their winter feed intake even when penned and fed a constant high quality pelleted ration. The onset of spring produces a dramatic rise in feed intake and animal growth.

Two of the most dramatic things to emerge from the embryonic deer farming industry are the extremely high rates of stocking on grass possible during the spring-summer period, and the high meat production achieved per hectare. One of the main reasons for this is the growth process in deer. They are inherently lean animals even when farmed on first class land. Since the synthesis of one kilogram of fat requires something like six times the amount of food needed to synthesise one kilogram of lean meat it is immediately apparent how much more efficient low fat producing animals are than high fat producers.

Most of our farmed deer, at least up to 15 months of age, have carcasses that are no more than seven percent fat whereas lambs and cattle at common slaughter weight have usually 25-40 percent fat in the carcass. As animal fat is not highly regarded in human food now, venison is a very healthy meat proposition from this point of view. A venison chop will contain about 35 percent fewer calories than lean beef steak.

Taste: Many people who enjoy the "gamey" flavour of venison believe that farmed venison will be "flat". The question is important because one can only sell what a customer is prepared to buy. Results of research so far suggest that flavour differences, if any, between the two classes of venison are insignificant. Taste panel participants have rated farmed venison as very desirable and an extremely tender meat.

Although the slaughter of farmed deer commenced only in early 1976 indications are that New Zealand hotels and restaurants will use this class of meat in specialist dishes and that patrons are keen to try them. Farmed venison has a promising future in New Zealand and overseas where it will further diversify our country's range of exported agricultural products.

Next time you dine at a New Zealand hotel or restaurant why not strike out into a new eating experience and ask for a venison dish? ●