



A RABBIT FOR THE POT

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WELL, you've shot your bunny what now? Rabbits are extremely good eating, so what a pity to just sell it to the game dealer for beer money, or worse still feed it to the ferrets or dogs.

The first trick, to avoid tainted meat, and urine in your game bag, is to allow it to cool for five minutes or so and then empty the bladder by pressing the lower abdomen with the thumb. This cannot be done immediately after death, so do not try too soon.

Secondly, since rabbits do not have a convenient carrying handle, it is normal practice to 'hock' or 'harl' them. This is done by making a slot between the bone and tendon of one hind leg (traditionally the left) and passing the other leg through. This is then cut just behind the heel to prevent it slipping back out.

For best table qualities it is best to clean the rabbit out fairly quickly, especially if there is a risk that the gut has been punctured by shooting, as the contents will quickly taint the flesh. To do this easily hang the rabbit up by the hind legs and pinch the belly skin between the thighs, cut across this fold of skin with a sharp knife, to make a small hole into the belly. Then insert two finger tips into this

and cut down towards the chest with the tip of a sharp blade, taking care not to puncture the gut itself. It is then possible to reach forward into the hole with the first two fingers of one hand and slide them around the stomach. At this point pull gently upwards and the stomach will come away complete with the rest of the gut, allowing it to be broken away from above, between the thighs and removed intact.

The rabbit is now in a fit state to be hung for a few days in a cool, fly proof place until needed for the pot, or ready to freeze. As with all other game, opinions vary widely as to how long to hang rabbits, but those who are afraid to keep them a while should remember that "fresh" meat from the butcher has usually been hung in cold storage for some time and is much better for it, as this allows the flesh to tenderise. Although half and three quarter grown rabbits can be used straight away, it is best to keep adult ones for a couple of days to tenderise, provided that it is cool enough to do so.

When the time comes to skin the rabbit, first remove the liver and kidneys and put these aside. They should be carefully guarded,



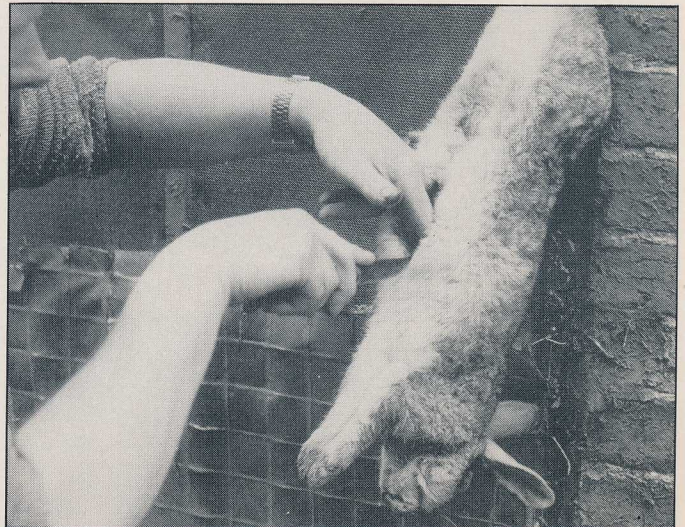
1. To hock a rabbit, make a slot between the bone and tendon of one leg



2. and pass the other through.



3. Rabbits are easy to gut, especially if hung up at eye level.



4. Open the belly by slicing down with a sharp blade, using the tips of two fingers to hold the gut back and prevent puncturing.

as they are utterly delicious, especially when fried with eggs and bacon to make a rabbit shooters breakfast. The liver contains a gall bladder in a little groove in its largest lobe. This is **very bitter** and should be carefully removed without bursting.

Skinning itself is very easy, but a bench or table to work on does help. The only other tool required is a knife. First, unhook the hind legs and lay the rabbit on its back, then separate the flesh from the

skin along the cut flank, peeling it away right round to the back. Repeat this on the other side, so that the skin is completely free over the small of the back, and then continue this towards the tail.

At this point it is necessary to skin the haunches (hind legs) by a combination of pushing the leg forwards and pulling the skin back. Each leg should be freed down to the ankle joint and then cut off. This is easily done by scoring the bone with the knife and then



5. The gall bladder lies in a groove in the largest lobe of the liver — remove it.



6. Start skinning by separating the skin and flank along the belly incision.



7. Skin the haunches by pulling the skin back and pushing the leg forwards.



8. Cut off the ankle joint by scoring the bone with a knife . . .



9. . . . and snapping from below.



10 Cut through the tail to free the skin at the back end . . .



11. . . . and pull it off forwards, freeing the front legs in the same way



12. . . . and cut off the head.



13. The shoulders are simply sliced away from the rib cage.



14. Remove the hind end of the gut by cutting down between the haunches, just off centre on each side



15. . . . and pulling away the piece of bone.



16. The haunches are removed by cutting through the meat at the "waist" and twisting them off.

carefully snapping it from below. The skin will now be held at the back end only by the tail, which is easy to cut with a knife.

From here it is easy to take the haunches in one hand and the skin in the other and pull it off forwards to the shoulders, then freeing each of the forelegs in much the same way as the hind. Another short pull leaves the skin attached only by the head.

Butchers often sell rabbits with the entire skin removed and the head still on, but this is only really a kind of make-weight, and most shooting people cut off at the neck and throw the head and skin away complete, leaving a nice clean carcass for the pot. However, there are still a couple of small things to do, firstly to remove the heart and lungs, which can go to the dog pot, and secondly to remove the end of the gut. To do this lay the rabbit on its back on a board, and with a sharp heavy knife cut between the thighs, through the first two bones, just to one side of centre. A similar cut to the other side will free this small piece of bone, along with any remaining gut, and the two anal glands at the base of the tail.

At this stage, most people rinse the rabbit in cold tapwater to remove any loose hairs, spots of blood and so on, while some soak the rabbit for a few hours, or overnight. This soaking can enhance the look of badly shot rabbits, by removing some of the worst staining, but it does remove quite a lot of flavour too, and presumably some of the nutritional value.

At this stage the rabbit can either be kept whole, or cut into joints, depending on the cook's wishes. For freezing, however, it is probably best not to cut it up until after de-frosting, as this seems to reduce any tendency to dry out while frozen. In this respect it is well worth double wrapping any game for the freezer, as well as excluding all air bubbles.

Young rabbits can be very good if filled with stuffing (sage and onion, as for chicken, is good), sewn up and roasted whole, with a few rashers of streaky bacon laid over the back.

Otherwise, most systems of cooking call for jointing the rabbit, whether it be a youngster to fry (in butter, with a few onions and mushrooms) or an older one for some sort of casserole. The shoulders can be simply cut off by slicing through the muscle between them and the ribcage, while the two haunches can be cut off together by cutting through to the bone on both sides at the "waist" where they join the back. When this is done it is easy to separate them by twisting them off. A cut down each side of the backbone from the tail separates these from the small piece of bone which is retained for the stockpot. The saddle can then be removed by cutting off the flank and up through the first six or seven ribs with a pair of scissors before again cutting through to the central bone and twisting off. This gives a total of five joints, plus the neck, flanks and ribs which are really only worth using for stock. Since a meat cleaver has not been used, there should be no nasty splinters of bone in your supper.

The next stage is to use the rabbit for any one of a multitude of casseroles, of which rabbit in beer is one of the better alternatives. To do this you need a jointed rabbit, a small can of light ale, a couple of onions, a couple of carrots, a sprig of thyme, a bay leaf, some salt and black pepper, some cornflour and a little butter for frying. Sprinkle the joints with salt and pepper, lightly fry to seal and then remove to a casserole. Then fry the chopped onion and carrots in the same pan for a minute or two and pour on the beer, adding the herbs and salt to taste (the mix will be rather bitter at this stage, but do not worry, just correct the amount of salt). Then thicken the whole lot with cornflour, pour over the rabbit joints, cover and cook in a low oven for about two hours.

As alternatives to this recipe you can use ham stock in place of beer (but no extra salt), or a more continental version using olive oil for frying and a mix of stock from the rabbit bones and tomato juice, plus the addition of a sprig of Rosemary and a clove of garlic.



17. Jointing completed — from left to right:— kidneys, liver, haunches (top), saddle (centre), shoulders (bottom) and rib cage for the stock pot.