

Chef's Corner: Cypriot Venison Meatballs (“Keftedes”)

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Flavors and traditions from the Mediterranean collide with Southeastern Virginia ground venison to create this tasty treat that can be served as an appetizer or main fare – and it’s just as good cold or hot!

This month’s featured recipe was put to the test at the 60th Annual VBAC Awards Banquet at St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church in Virginia Beach – the perfect venue for this Cypriot classic known as “Keftedes” – or fried meatballs.

The traditional recipe is often made with a blend of ground pork, lamb, and beef, but many different ground meats will work. The idea of blending meats simply enabled all the trimmings from the hunt or the harvest to be assimilated in a simple, tasty dish such that nothing was wasted.

To prove just how versatile this recipe is, I have repeatedly made Keftedes from 100% pure lean wild venison without any beef or pork fat added, and it is superb – to the point of fooling the experts...my father and uncle – both from the Old Country and fierce adherents to traditional flavors and methods.

The signature cigar-shaped delicacy is always the first to go at any of our family gatherings, and from all accounts, VBAC folks did a great job of wiping them out at the banquet, too! This is sure to appear at an upcoming CHAC potluck dinner!

I made the batch featured in this article at our farm in Southampton County, VA, using ground venison from the freezer which was harvested on the property during the early 2018 archery season. We turn some pretty good food out of our modest kitchen at the hunting camp, and it is particularly satisfying to know the star ingredient comes from our land!



Feature Picture: Venison Keftedes with Tzatziki Sauce!

Cypriot Venison Meatballs (Keftedes)

Ingredients:

- 1 pound ground venison (give or take a few ounces)
- 1 medium potato, peeled and grated
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh parsley (can substitute mint, too!)
- 2 Eggs
- 4 cloves fresh garlic, crushed and finely minced; or, substitute 1 or 2 teaspoons granulated garlic
- 1 tablespoon salt (I like to “salt the board” after mincing garlic to absorb the oils – see below)
- ½ teaspoon black pepper (use up to a full teaspoon for more spice)
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon, ground (can substitute ¼ tsp each of ground cinnamon and clove for more aromatic flavors)
- Oil for frying (peanut, canola, vegetable, etc.)



Basic Ingredients from the Farm Fridge!

NOTE: It’s okay to err on the conservative side of spice at first – simply mix and fry a “sample” meatball to taste. You can always add more spice, but you can’t easily take it away! For the banquet, I scaled everything up for 6 lbs. of venison.



Grated Potato, Onion, & Parsley.



Mincing the Garlic.



Salting the board to absorb the oils!



All Ingredients Ready to Mix.



Blended Mixture "Ready to Roll"



Rolled and Ready to Fry!



Frying Keftedes in a Skillet.



Fresh from the Fryer!



Sampling a few with Tzatziki Sauce!

Instructions:

Combine all ingredients in a large vessel and mix thoroughly until texture firms-up. It will feel soupy until well blended, so keep mixing until a firm, tacky texture is achieved. Let chill in fridge to "set" –this helps firm-up the mixture further before rolling. Roll chilled mixture into 2-inch long cigar-shaped meatballs (small round meatballs work fine, too!). Heat oil to approximately 375°F while rolling the meatballs. Fry until golden brown on each side – approximately 3-5 minutes per side depending on size. Serve hot *or* cold as a main dish or appetizer ("meze"). Garnish with lemon wedges, scallions, and fresh parsley or mint – we like to squeeze a little fresh lemon on the meatballs as well! This dish is great with a side of Tzatziki, Pita bread (or Pita Chips), Greek salad, humus, olives, and/or Cypriot Haloumi cheese made from fresh goat's milk!

Contributed by: VBAC Angler John Germanos (aka "The Instinctive Chef")

