

Venison Wellington | SERVES 4

Ingredients

butter, for frying | 120g (4¼oz)
 goose liver | 1 x quantity Crêpes (see
 page 138) | 600g (1lb 5oz) venison
 fillet | 500g (1lb 2oz) good-quality
 readymade puff pastry | plain flour,
 for dusting | beaten egg, to glaze |
 1 x quantity Red Wine Sauce (see
 page 57), to serve

For the duxelles

2 tsp vegetable oil | 200g (7oz) king
 oyster mushrooms, cleaned and finely
 diced | 10g (¼oz) shallot, finely diced |
 1 garlic clove, finely diced | 50ml
 (2fl oz) double cream

For the chicken mousse

500g (1lb 2oz) chicken breasts | 1 tsp
 sea salt flakes | 2 egg whites | 500ml
 (18fl oz) double cream

The Wellington. A centuries-old classic. Or is it? The first-known recipe, as is often cited, appeared in a New York restaurant guide of 1939. In fact credit should go to Ernest Amiet, a French chef who had worked in Switzerland and England (possibly for Escoffier) before being appointed executive chef of The Palmer House, a swish hotel in Chicago. In 1933 he published *The Palmer House Cook Book*, providing this recipe for tenderloin of beef Wellington:

Lard 4 lbs of beef tenderloin, roast for 15 minutes, let cool and spread with cold, brown fine herb sauce. Roll out a piece of puff paste. Place the tenderloin on top and seal the meat with this dough. Paint with yellow of egg. Bake for 20 minutes in moderate oven (350°F). Serve with hot brown fine herb sauce.

So it is not as old as many might assume, and it is unlikely that the Duke of Wellington ever tasted the dish that bears his name because he died in 1852. There's no question it is extremely French in its cooking method. And the French, of course, have been enjoying boeuf en croûte – fillet of beef baked in pastry – for quite some years. The history and myths are subjects to discuss at the table while you savour the Wellington. Meanwhile, let's think about the making of this grand dish...

To begin with, it must deliver surprise. Like Chicken en Vessie (see page 88), it has a moment of suspense, perhaps a little drama, as the unveiling takes place. The Wellington's pastry is sliced at the table, to reveal the fillet – cooked rare. For my recipe, that fillet is not beef but venison.

So many cooks believe the Wellington is beyond them. The way they see it, this is one culinary challenge after another. "I'll overcook the meat," they say. "The pastry will fall apart in the oven... If it all goes wrong I'll look like a fool... And the meat is not cheap, either, so it'll be a waste of money... I'll ruin it, I know I will..."

What a shame, therefore, that so few attempt it. Strange though it might seem, this is an ideal dish for every novice cook. You see, Wellington is prepared in stages, and not one of them needs to be rushed. You don't need fancy gadgets. Your senses alone will get you there. Most of the cooking can be done in advance so, as you work, consider the wise words of the great chef Fernand Point: "Perfection is lots of simple things done well." Inside the pastry, there are five components and not one of them will cause a headache.

1. Goose liver, briefly seared in a pan and wrapped inside the fillet. No trouble.
2. The fillet of venison. It is seared in a pan – easy.
3. The duxelles – this was Amiet's "brown fine herb sauce", and is merely a fancy French term for a mixture of mushrooms and shallots that are sautéed.
4. Chicken mousse – this is mixed with the duxelles and then covers the fillet. Again, no bother whatsoever.
5. A couple of pancakes to wrap around the above. How difficult are pancakes? >

Venison Wellington | CONTINUED

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These components can be made at different times, not least because they should be cold before they are assembled and wrapped up in the pastry before baking. In other words, there is no cause for panic; do not feel intimidated.

Putting the assembly to one side for a moment, let's go through the stages. You'll need a proper heavy-based frying pan, or sauté pan, and some butcher's string. You'll need a chopping board, rolling pin and baking tray. Oh, and an oven.

Melt the butter and, when it's foaming and has a nutty aroma, lay the goose liver into the pan. Sear it on each side. This only takes a minute or two. Remove it from the pan and leave it to cool. Once the liver has cooled, put it into the centre of the fillet of venison. Roll up and tie the venison with butcher's string, nice and tight.

Now, return to the pan. Put it over a medium heat, add the butter and let it melt. You know the drill by now – the butter should be foaming and with that nutty aroma, when you place the rolled venison fillet into the pan. What's the aim of this stage? It is not to cook the venison through, only to brown it; to caramelize the outside. Yes, it helps to seal the meat but caramelizing also adds plenty of flavour. The fillet is removed from the pan, placed on a wire rack and allowed to cool. Remember, there's no need to rush. When the fillet has cooled, remove the string.

Then the duxelles. Go back to the pan, heat the oil and then add the mushrooms. Some people don't cook the mushrooms long enough. That can cause a problem. Let the mushrooms release their juices and then continue to cook over a medium-low heat until all juices have evaporated and the mushrooms are almost dry. Problem solved. Add the shallot and garlic, letting them sweat for a couple of minutes. Pour in the cream, increase the heat and let it bubble away until it has thickened; this is not a runny mixture. Remove the pan from the heat and leave the mixture to cool.

The duxelles will be combined with the chicken mousse, which I can tell you about in two sentences. In a bowl and using a stick blender, blend the chicken with the salt and egg whites. Put the bowl on to a bowl of ice and, little by little, beat the cream into the chicken mixture.

Mix together the pancake ingredients. Heat a pan, brush it with butter, pour in the batter and make a couple of pancakes. Leave them to cool.

We're nearly there...

Mix the cooled mushroom duxelles with the chicken mousse.

Get the chopping board. Lay the pancakes in front of you so they slightly overlap. Spread some of the chicken mousse and duxelles mixture on to the pancakes. Lay the venison on top. Place some more of the chicken mixture on top of the fillet. Wrap the pancakes around the fillet.

This brings us to the pastry, and I like to use puff pastry for a Wellington. Lightly dust a work surface with flour, then roll out the pastry to a thickness of about 3mm ($\frac{1}{8}$ inch). (If you don't have a ruler, 3mm ($\frac{1}{8}$ inch) is about the depth of a pound coin.) And it needs to be large enough to wrap around the fillet, of course.

Put the pancake-wrapped fillet on top of the pastry and wrap it up. Use egg wash to seal the sides and brush the top. It is now ready to be baked. However, you might want to make a pastry lattice to go over the pastry. Put the Wellington on a baking tray. Brush it with egg wash.

That's the prep all done

When you are ready to cook, preheat the oven to 200°C (400°F), Gas Mark 6. It's quite a high temperature. Why? Because the pastry needs to be "fixed". If the oven temperature is too low, the butter in the pastry will melt and the pastry will run. So avoid this catastrophe by ensuring the oven is very hot. Bake the Wellington for 20 minutes. The pastry should be golden. If not, simply continue to bake it. Once the Wellington is out of the oven, let it rest on the tray for 10 minutes before transferring to a board and carving at the table, as your guests say, "If I tried to make that, I wouldn't know where to begin..." Serve with vegetables of your choice.

1912 *In the middle of a private party (attended by the Prince of Wales), a gigantic basket of flowers is wheeled into the room. "An exquisite female leg appears," recalls a guest. It is that of Anna Pavlova. The Russian prima ballerina (after whom the meringue dessert is named) then dances to the delight of her surprised audience.*