

Minnesota Grown Elk

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At one time, native elk roamed most of the state of Minnesota, abundant in the prairies and hardwood forest transition zones of the state. Today, elk are raised by farmers throughout Minnesota. Our state is 1st in the nation in number of elk raised, according to the 2012 USDA Census of Agriculture.



Have you ever given this meat a try? Elk has been growing in popularity for 10 years due to its flavor, nutritional benefits, and more. Try incorporating elk into your next family meal or bring an elk dish to your next gathering or potluck.

We spoke with Brenda Hartkopf, the executive secretary for [Minnesota Elk Breeders Association](#), office manager for the [North American Elk Breeders Association](#), and owner of [Splendor Ridge Elk Farm](#) in Howard Lake, MN. We also spoke with Mark Lucas from [Misery Creek Elk](#) in Hamburg, MN about his experience raising elk and its growing popularity among consumers! We would like to thank [Minnesota Elk Breeders Association](#) for helpful information and the photos included in this article.

Brenda Hartkopf, [Splendor Ridge Elk Farm](#)

Splendor Ridge farm got its start in 1993 with just three calves and 5 acres of land. Today, Brenda and her husband Lance have a herd of 120 animals on their now 75 acre family farm. We asked Brenda what her favorite aspect of raising elk was and she replied, "They are very majestic



animals and the products they produce are amazing! Not only do they produce excellent tasting meat, their yearly production of antler creates a number of additional marketing opportunities for producers.”

Mark Lucas, [Misery Creek Elk](#)

Mark grew up on a diversified farm raising sheep, beef, and poultry, and became interested in raising elk after visiting the Minnesota Elk Breeders booth at the Minnesota State Fair! He shared with us, “I ordered an informational packet from the MNEBA Association and never looked back.” Mark enjoys raising elk and like Brenda, describes the animals as “magestic and fun to be around.” He also commented on the healthiness of this animal and the efficiency of their pasture grazing.

Why Elk?

Since elk are native to Minnesota, they thrive in our cold winters and cooler summers. Mark told us that compared to warmer areas; elk actually will grow larger and perform better in chilly northern climates like ours! Though these animals still have some wild tendencies, Brenda says that raising elk includes respecting and working with their natural instincts. “We know the elk like to move around corners and curves,” Brenda shares, “and we incorporate that into our pasture and farm design.”



Raising elk produces more than just meat! Elk offer a variety of products including meat, antler products, preserve bulls and breeding stock. In fact, Brenda states that elk demand currently exceeds supply. “We need more farmers to get into the business of raising elk! Demand for Minnesota elk products is thriving – so much that there is not enough supply to sustain the huge public demand at this time.” These markets include velvet antler for domestic health supplements and international trade; hard antler for dog chews and international trade; breeding stock and preserve bulls.

Elk meat is lean due to the eating habits of this species. Elk take in a lot of their diet from native grasses, trees, and bushes, and are very efficient pasture grazers. Domesticated elk derive most of their food from oats, grass, and hay. This in turn creates very lean tissue, and a tasty cut of meat!



Cooking with Elk

Elk can be substituted in many other red meat recipes. The [Minnesota Elk Breeders Association](#) has a myriad of delicious recipe ideas to try ([check them out here](#)). Brenda suggests taking care when cooking elk the first time, as elk is naturally lean and cooks faster than higher fat meats. She tells us, “Shorter cooking times are the key to success.”

Naturally, we had to ask our experts to share their favorite way to enjoy elk. Mark’s favorite recipe is elk tacos. Brenda told us, “Our family loves the simple elk burger; we have them at least once a week. I add a little salt, pepper and diced onion and that’s it. I also love to use the ground burger for casseroles, chili, spaghetti and tacos. There’s a perfect amount of fat to cook the meat and no excess fat and moisture to have to deal with.” Our mouths are watering already, how about yours?

How can I purchase elk direct from a Minnesota Grown producer?

- 1.) Make a connection with a local elk producer near you that sells direct to their consumers. Visit the [Minnesota Grown online](#) Directory to find a producer based on town, zip code, or by browsing the map! Or, ask your local food friends! Buying local meat offers a unique opportunity to build connections to both the farmer and processor. Brenda advises, “Call far in advance of when you’re wanting to purchase elk meat, you may be put on a waiting list. The current supply of elk meat is not meeting the huge public demand for it.” She suggests calling during summer or fall.
- 2.) Next, decide on the amount of meat you are interested in. Some producers sell retail cuts directly from their farm or at a local farmers market, but each producer can be different in the way they handle orders. Other producers and processors market livestock as: whole animals, half, quarters, sides, or sometimes even smaller fractions of the animal.
- 3.) Chat with the local producer about their offerings. Each producer is unique, so don’t be afraid to reach out and ask the producer what their quantity options are. It is important to be comfortable with your producer and processor of choice- go ahead and ask questions, this is the beauty of working one on one with your farmer.
- 4.) Bring home your locally raised elk and enjoy!!