

How to Skin, Gut and Joint a Rabbit

Rabbits were introduced to Britain by the Romans, who kept them in fenced of warrens to harvest them for their meat and fur. The name 'Conies' comes from their scientific name *Oryctolagus cuniculus*. A sound investment considering the reproduction rate: The breeding season last from February to October, normal gestation is 30 days, each litter can be up to 12 babies and it is possible in one season for a doe (female) to produce over 100 babies a year- hence the term 'rutting like rabbits'.

The meat isn't as popular as it used to be in the UK, the mere sight of a brace of conies hanging by their hind legs conjures up a distinctly medieval scene in my head, sadly this avoidance is probably related to its domestication, rabbits do look fluffy and cute, but they taste even better! In France you would be hard- pressed to not come across them boxed up in a supermarket, whereas they are only just starting to appear in supermarkets, although butchers always seem to have some tucked away somewhere. So how do you get your hands on them? Well there is more than one way to skin a cat...

The gun, the snare and the ferret are the three pillars of rabbit acquisition. Starting with the most disruptive, the very dependable shotgun maybe the most full proof, but it can smash a rabbit to pieces and introduce plenty of lead to your diet (the kind that collect at the bottom of the loo pan). Air Rifles and .22 rifles are the prescribed method, a clean shot to the head and the meat remains untainted and guts intact. By far the best is for quality is ferreted rabbits, a bit more hands on than the other two, meaning you will have to break the rabbits neck yourself- a karat chop to the back of the neck or by taking the fingers used for flicking the 'V', putting them over the nape of the neck forcing the rabbit's head to the floor, grab the back legs and pull up sharply, crack. Gosh, this is getting clinical.

How to Skin, Gut and Joint a Rabbit (applies to squirrels too!)

1. Lay the rabbit on a heavy chopping board or block of wood and with a meat cleaver or old knife and hammer, chop off all the feet just above the 'knees'. Cut off the tail and then, using the same tools and technique, remove the head (the most unpleasant bit).



2. Lift the fur at the belly and make a horizontal incision and pull the skin away from the rabbit. Insert the knife into the horizontal cut taking care not to pierce the stomach, then, holding the knife upside down so the sharp edge faces upwards slowly cut the skin from the belly up to the neck.



3. Gradually pull the skin away from the rabbit's flesh, which if fresh, should come away easily. Work your way around the body of the rabbit to begin with and then upward to the front legs. The legs must be popped out through the skin, The best way to do this is to pull out the skin around the leg and push on the stump of the rabbit's leg from the other side – a bit like taking off a jacket.



4. The final stage is to grip the shoulders of the rabbit and pull the skin down over the back legs, again, like removing an item of clothing.



5. Next you must paunch or gut the rabbit; this will prevent it from spoiling. Make another horizontal cut across the belly (this time try not to pierce the intestines), and gradually slice open the stomach. Reach in and upwards to the ribs and grasp the intestines and remove with one firm tug. Put aside the rabbit's liver for eating – this is the best bit!



6. Cut through the diaphragm and pull out the lungs and heart. With a knife cut out the rabbits 'bottom', make two cuts to form a 'V'-shape where the tail was and remove any remaining droppings from the rectum. Give the rabbit a scrub under running water; it is now ready to be jointed or cooked.



7. A rabbit is usually jointed into five sections: the two hind legs, the saddle and the two front legs and rib cage. The first chop is just made above the hind legs. Once separated,

chop down the middle of the hind legs. Then chop the top of the saddle, just below the ribcage and then split the front legs and torso down the spleen.

Rabbit meat has long been referred to as 'tasting like chicken'. To make this as accurate as possible, the practice of soaking the meat overnight in a salty bath arose, making the meat slightly paler and removing any hint of gamey flavour. Absolute piffle! Why make rabbit not taste like rabbit?

How you cook your rabbit depends on its age: younger rabbits are good for roasting and frying and older specimens for stewing. Generally, I take a different approach that ensures you get the most meat of the beast, this also applies to squirrel.

Once skinned, gutted and cleaned, simmer the rabbit's whole in simple stock made up of carrot, onion, celery, one bay leaf, a few peppercorns and a sprinkle of salt. Simmer the rabbits for 2 hours; remove from the stock and leave to cool. The meat is now tender as you like and simply falls off the bone, leaving you with a generous portion of meat and the starting point for 101 different options. This is also the only way you will be able to fit a whole rabbit into two jam jars...



Instead of making a rabbit pie or stew, I decided to take the hunter-gatherer approach and make something with a lasting quality; so potted rabbit was the obvious choice. Again, I could have made a simple potted rabbit in the traditional sense: add a bit of cayenne pepper, pinch of mace, dollop of mustard, chopped gherkins and capers- all very well and extremely tasty, but I wanted to try something different...

Chimichurri hails from Argentina and as such is amazing with beef (and lamb too, in fact with anything!), it consists of four main ingredients that really stand out: chillies, parsley,

garlic and vinegar. Legend has it that an Irish meat importer named 'Jimmy McCurry' came up with the concoction whilst on a buying mission to the country. Needless to say the locals loved it and adapted it as their own, the name is odd but it is because the natives couldn't pronounce his name... True story, I shit you not! It really is a wonderful sauce- a must for anyone who likes a bit of BBQ action, it is a playful recipe so you can chop and change extra ingredients. As it is just coming into season, I substituted wild garlic leaves for the garlic cloves.

Potted Rabbit with Chimichurri

For the Chimichurri:

3 red chillies

8 garlic cloves (or a bunch of wild garlic leaves)

2 large handfuls of parsley

4 TSP dried oregano

5 TBSP cider vinegar (red or white also good)

5 TBSP olive oil

1 TSP black pepper

2 TSP sea salt flakes

2 shallots

Juice of 1 lime

Finely chop all ingredients, place in a bowl and add the liquids, mix well. Set aside for at least two hours or overnight if you can.



For the Potted Rabbit:

2 rabbits

4 rashers of bacon

100g butter

2 bay leaves

1 stick of celery

1 onion

1 carrot

Olive oil

Salt & pepper

Once you have prepared your rabbits as mentioned earlier, they have a tendency to be dry and tough if not treated correctly. Roughly chop the vegetables and stick them in a big pan with the rabbits and bay leaves and a generous pinch of salt, cover with water. Bring to the boil and then turn the heat down and simmer for 2 hours.

Fry off 4 rashers of bacon and chop up finely to add to the rabbit later.

Remove the rabbit from the stock and leave aside to cool. Once cooled pick off every scrap of meat you can and place it in a mixing bowl, break it up as much as possible by hand- do not stick it in a blender- rustic chunks are preferable!

Pour over the chimichurri sauce and add an extra drizzle of Oil and the bacon, then mix vigorously until well combined. Have a taste, if you think it need a bit of seasoning- go for it.

Potting up the rabbit:

Take 5 sterilised jam jars (kilner jars are best) and start spooning and pressing down the rabbit mix. Fill to within half an inch of the top.

In a small pan, melt the butter over a low heat until it separates. Pour the clarified butter (take care not to pour in any of the milk solids at the bottom) and fill to the top. Place in the fridge (or outside in English February) to set. Once set, for a little decoration I added a star of pickled ash keys, which are the wild equivalent of capers- excellent with rabbit! Slap on the lids and consume within 2 weeks once opened. A jar of potted rabbit will last unopened for up to 6 months.