



Local. Natural. Meaty.

Dickson's Farmstand Meats – Beef Jerky 101

At first glance, jerky is a strange food. If I told you that I was going to take a piece of meat, cover it in salt and then dry it out for 8 hours, you'd probably think twice before eating it. Despite its counterintuitive preparation, jerky's combination of saltiness, meatiness, chewiness and flat out deliciousness makes it a snack enjoyed by tailgaters, campers, road-trippers and carnivores alike. Despite its intimidating nature, jerky is fairly easy to make at home. Most of the ingredients necessary can be found at the grocery store and any specialized equipment is optional. Outlined below are the basics you'll need to know to make jerky at home. How complex and exotic (or simple!) you want to flavor your jerky is up to you! The most important thing to keep in mind is to have fun and, like any hobby, don't be disappointed if your first attempts aren't perfect. Make notes as you go and soon you'll be a pro.

Making your own jerky can be broadly divided into four steps:

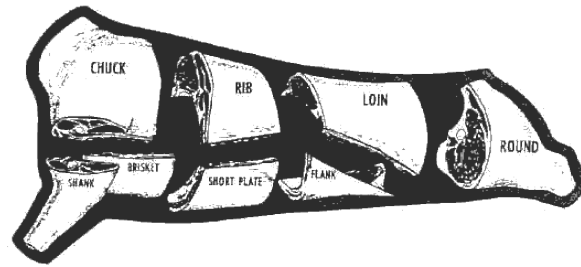
1. Choosing and sourcing your meat
2. Trimming and slicing
3. Marinating and seasoning
4. Dehydrating

1. Choosing and sourcing your meat

While beef is the most popular type of jerky, almost any type of meat can be salted and dried: pork, elk, salmon, even kangaroo are all used to make jerky. The term "jerky" is thought to come from the Quechua word *ch'arki* meaning 'to burn meat'. Cattle didn't arrive in the America's until after the Columbian Exchange so it's likely that the early inhabitants in the area were making their dried meat from llamas and other native species like deer. All that said there's no reason not to start with beef and move on to more exotic meats as you perfect your skills. For all intents and purposes, directions from here on out will focus on making beef jerky but can be applied to almost all types of meat.

As mentioned in the class, as you remove water from the meat, you are not only preserving it by preventing bacterial growth but intensifying the flavor of the beef. This makes it all the more important to start with good-tasting beef. Make sure you're working with fresh meat (this is important regardless of the type of meat you're using). Self-promotions aside, the best way to ensure this is to go to a butcher and ask. If they

won't tell you when it was cut or aren't sure, then the meat may not be as fresh as you want.



Now that you know you want fresh meat, what cuts should you use? At Dickson's we like cuts off the Round. These include: Top and Bottom Round, Eye Round, Tip Cap and Tip Side. Why use the round? In general, leaner meat yields tastier jerky as dehydrated fat can have an off-putting taste. Despite being lean, the Round still has great flavor ideal for jerky. Lastly, it's a fairly inexpensive part of the animal that will afford you the opportunity to make more than enough jerky without breaking the bank.

**Note: if you're using a leaner overall animal like deer or bison, you can make jerky out of almost any cut on the carcass, not just the Round.*

2. Trimming and Slicing

As mentioned earlier, you want your jerky to be as lean as possible before you marinate and dehydrate it. If you buy an untrimmed piece of meat, you'll need to remove as much of the exterior fat, sinew and silver skin as possible while being careful not to remove any meat. During your first attempts, this may be a step best left to your butcher. Once you get more comfortable with the process, have your butcher trim part of the meat and try and emulate their efforts at home.



Trimmed and untrimmed bottom round

Now that you have your trimmed piece of meat, it's time to start slicing. The ideal slice of jerky will be about $1/8 - 1/4$ of an inch thick. This will give you a thin enough piece to dehydrate adequately while still maintaining some chew. If you're not comfortable slicing the whole bottom round, cut it in half and make smaller pieces or strips. The

important thing here is consistency. As you dry out your meat, smaller pieces will dehydrate faster than larger ones, which can affect your final product. As with trimming, it may be helpful to have your butcher cut a few slices for you to use as a benchmark at home.

**A Note on Knives: At the shop, we have the luxury of using very sharp knives on a daily basis. If you don't have a sharp knife at home, don't bother trying to slice jerky, as you'll only frustrate yourself. Not only is using a sharp knife safer, it makes all culinary tasks easier. Not sure if your knife is sharp? Hold up a piece of regular paper in one hand. Try and slice through it (the paper, not your fingers). Your knife should go right through with little resistance. If you have to saw back and forth, your knife may need sharpening. If you don't know how to sharpen (sharpen, not hone) your knife at home, take it to a kitchen supply store that offers knife sharpening services or better yet take a class and learn to do it yourself! Korin Trading Co. in TriBeCa (Korin.com) offers great services AND classes.*

3. Marinating

Now for the fun part - go nuts! The best part about making jerky at home is that you are the captain of this flavor cruise. If you want to make strawberry-mango-pumpkin-garlic jerky, they by-golly you go ahead and make it (although I wouldn't advise it). What I would advise is to start simple. Try a favorite, tried and true steak marinade – Asian influenced marinades tend to translate very well to jerky making (teriyaki!). While there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to marinating and flavoring, there are a few basic tenets you'll want to follow to increase your chances of success:

- **Salt**. Make sure to add at least 1 tsp of salt per pound of meat.
- **Try not to add much oil**. Oil prevents moisture from escaping your meat increasing your drying time dramatically. A small amount of a flavored oil (less than a few tablespoons) like sesame is fine.
- **Be careful with citrus juices** – Citric acid will cook your meat (think ceviché) if left to marinate for too long and will yield a mushy and mealy texture.
- **Balance** – A good marinade has balance. If you're going for something spicy, add a little honey or sweet soy sauce to balance it out. If you're going sweet, add a little sour. This is where building off an existing recipe can be really useful.
- **Taste**- Taste your marinade as you build it. It'll be intense but keep in mind that its being spread over a lot of meat so don't be shy about adding more salt or other ingredients.

Once you have your marinade made, it's time to apply it to the meat. While a vacuum sealer makes things easier, it is by no means necessary. In a large, leak-proof container, pour some of your marinade on the bottom and lay your meat on top of it in one single layer with as little overlap as possible. Then add some more marinade to evenly coat the top of the first layer. Begin stacking in single layers of meat alternating with marinade until all of your jerky is laid out and well coated. Let it sit for *at least* 24

hours but no longer than 72. When you're ready to dehydrate, discard any marinade left in the container.

4. Dehydrating

This is when the magic happens. To dehydrate your jerky, you want to place it in a dry, low-heat environment for several hours. Ideal drying temperatures for meat are between 150°F-175°F.

There are several types of ways to dry out your jerky. Below is a rundown of each:

**Note: it's always a good idea to place an oven thermometer in the center of your oven before you start. This will give you a much more accurate temperature reading than the knob of your oven.*

- Electric Oven
 - Electric ovens are great for jerky because they can generally maintain a low enough temperature on the “warm” setting. If you can set the temperature between 150°-175°, even better. Make sure to keep the door cracked to allow moist air to escape as your meat dries.
- Toaster Oven
 - Perfect for a small batch. Like the electric oven, keep the door slightly ajar to allow moist air to escape. Toaster ovens are also nice because many of them can be set to low temperatures (mine goes down to 120°F).
- Gas Oven
 - Gas ovens can be tricky as some have a hard time maintaining a low temperature like 175°F. An oven thermometer is almost essential to make sure you're in the ideal drying zone.
- Food Dehydrator
 - A food dehydrator is basically a low oven with a fan to circulate air and wick away moisture more efficiently. They're also especially easy to use as they maintain temperature very well and can be set to run on a timer. They range in price from \$50 all the way up to \$400 with several perfectly good models in the \$150 range. Before you go out and buy a dehydrator, make sure you plan on making several batches of jerky. While they require less monitoring, dehydrators are by no means *necessary* when it comes to home jerky making. Maybe make a few batches in the oven and once you're a seasoned jerky maker, then invest in a dehydrator.

After you've decided on your method of dehydration, it's time to set yourself up for success. If you're using any type of oven, I recommend lining the bottom with some aluminum foil to make clean up easier. While your oven preheats, lay your pieces of meat out in a single layer on either oven racks or wire cooling racks. If you like, you can place a cookie sheet on the bottom to catch any drippings as shown below. You can also hang your meat on the rods of your oven rack.



Jerky laid flat on wire racks



Jerky hanging off your oven rack

Place your meat into the preheated oven and set a timer for three hours. Check on your jerky and rotate the racks around every 45 minutes or so. Chances are, your jerky will need to dry a few hours longer than three hours but not all ovens run the same and at this point, your jerky may be done. Taste as you go and pull it when it's at your preferred chewiness. In fact, you may want to pull a piece and let it cool before sampling, as jerky will continue to firm up as it cools down.

**A note on safety: Even though your oven won't be very hot while making jerky, you'll still be running it for three to six hours. Don't leave your home unattended as anything can happen like marinade falling onto heating elements causing smoke to billow out of your oven.*

A Final Thought:

Making your own jerky should be a fun and educational experience. Give yourself plenty of time to learn the steps and remember: *it's just jerky*. There are plenty of important things in life to get worked up about - don't let this be one of them.

Further Reading and Info:

- For a simple, proven jerky recipe, check out:

Lobel's Meat Bible – Stanley, Evan, Mark and David Lobel

- For ideas on creating marinades and what flavors go well together, check out:

The Flavor Bible - Karen Page and Andrew Dornenburg

Dehydrators:

If you decide to invest in a dehydrator, **Excalibur** makes a great at-home version. If you find their prices a little steep, go for one of the moderately priced **Nesco** models. All will do the job, but the **Excalibur** has some features you may find useful like removable trays and a timer.

Still have questions? Don't hesitate to call us at the shop: 212-242-2630 or shoot me an email: ted@dicksonsfarmstand.com