How to Butcher Itxaygiñ (Reindeer)

Overview

Itxaygiñ (A), or reindeer, has been hunted and eaten in the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands region as part of the Unangax̂ diet for decades. In this film, Sally Swetzof, from Atka, shows us how to butcher itxaygiñ at camp Tanasxangin, the Atka & Akutan combined culture camp. Sally also provides an Unangam Tunuu lesson for the different parts of the itxaygiñ and shares her tips for preparing itxaygiñ into a delicious meal.

By: Sharon Kay

In Atka, the itxaygiñ leg meat is often called “ham.” You can cook the hams in many different ways. If you want to fry the hams, you can cut them into steaks. For soup, you can cut the meat into bite sized pieces. For roasting, you can cut the ham at the joint and leave the bone on.

The rib meat can also be prepared different ways. You can roast it, put it in soup or barbecue it. Any part of the itxaygiñ can be cooked similarly to how you would cook beef.

Qaqamiiĝuñ – A Traditional Foods Film Series
From The Aleutian and Pribilof Islands

Cooking Tips

UNANGAM TUNUU:
How to Butcher Itxâygi'x (Reindeer)

Many of these steps can be done in the field right after the itxâygi'x has been shot.

**STEP 1: REMOVE THE TONGUE**
To take the tongue off, cut from under the chin. Save the tongue to eat later. Some consider it the best part!

**STEP 2: REMOVE THE HEAD**
Cut around the fur along the neck. Using the antlers, twist the head until you can easily cut it away from the body.

**STEP 3: REMOVE THE HOOVES**
Start with the front hooves and cut directly at the joint. For the back hooves, cut below the joint. This is done so you can hang the itxâygi'x with ease using rope through the back leg joints.

**STEP 4: REMOVE THE INNARDS**
Take the skin off the stomach area. Cut open the itxâygi'x and remove the innards. Be careful not to cut open the stomach - it could spoil the meat! Save the heart to eat later, as it is a delicacy!

**STEP 5: REMOVE THE BUTTHOLE**
Cut round the rectum and pull it off.

**STEP 6: SKIN THE ITXÂYGI’X**
Always start from the hooves and work your way towards the back of the itxâygi'x. Usually it is done one side at a time.

**STEP 7: REMOVE THE LEG MEAT**
Once the skin is off, cut the forearms off. Then remove the legs, which are also called “reindeer hams.”

**STEP 8: REMOVE THE BREASTBONE MEAT**
Cut around the breastbone. Using your hands, break it away from the rest of the chest, then cut it completely off. The breastbone meat is also called, “brisket.”

**STEP 9: REMOVE THE TENDERLOIN**
It is the meat from off the backbone. Cut along down the center of the backbone using a saw or axe.

**STEP 10: REMOVE THE RIBS**