

Any Night Can Be (Wild) Game Night

Adding venison, quail, and other responsibly sourced meats to your repertoire is as revelatory as it is rewarding.

By [SHANE MITCHELL](#) | Published on October 29, 2024

All things game are not always wild, and all things wild aren't always fair game. Last fall, walking in my backwoods, I found a poacher had erected a portable blind and set out leftover Halloween pumpkins as deer bait. Not only did this trespassing flout Department of Environmental Conservation regulations—it also pissed me off, coming from a long line of Southern hunters who always stick to the rules. While I don't hunt myself, I'll gladly accept a brace of ducks or a backstrap of venison from friends who ask permission to legally stalk on my land. Where I live now, in northern New York, plenty of my neighbors still fill freezers with game to sustain their families all winter long. The extra meat stretches tight budgets and, sometimes, nourishes deep-rooted cultural practices.

As the leaves drop and the nights turn cold, chef Eliza Glaister, of Little Egg in Brooklyn, also turns to game to feed both her chosen family and favorite clients. Taught to shoot game birds by her British father, Glaister travels to Georgia and Florida for quail, and bakes pheasants she hunts in New York into flaky, deeply satisfying pies for neighbors in need.

Chef Matthew McClure also relishes a game-meat centerpiece for a crowd. While he now cooks at the Woodstock Inn & Resort in Vermont, he grew up hunting deer in the Arkansas Ozarks. He cures venison legs with his Calabrian chile spice blend, then smokes them whole over red oak and pecan woods.

Not all game meats are as grand as a roasted haunch, but that doesn't make them less worthy. Charleston, South Carolina-based chef Amethyst Ganaway gives ducks the nose-to-tail-feathers treatment with her Japanese-inspired recipe for duck heart yakitori because she believes innards are especially tasty and shouldn't go to waste. Ganaway marinates the hearts in a honey-soy glaze, then serves them as chewy bites before the other parts of the duck hit the grill.

In Texas, cooks do their part for conservation—and deplete the invasive wild boar population at the same time—by frying bacon. Lots of boar bacon. Chef Janie Ramirez of Dai Due in Austin uses it to deepen her braised horned mustard greens, which she drizzles with Steen's cane syrup, a sweet little nod to her home parish back in Louisiana.

I learned to clean and pluck quail from my Virginia-born father-in-law, Andrew D. Hart (“A-Dad”), who taught me that picking buckshot out of tiny birds is an acquired skill. A-Dad belonged to a formal hunt club, where game drives were followed by lavish breakfast buffets, and always brought home the extra birds so they wouldn't go to waste. My own version of pan-fried quail, smothered in a foraged mushroom gravy, honors the meals I cooked for him after a day in the field. It's an easy dish for home cooks who don't care to don camo.

Recently, one of my cousins decided to lay down his gun at last. He told me he'd spent so much time in the woods walking alongside wildlife, admiring Brother Deer, that his perspective on taking a life had shifted. Even so, he still loves a good venison roast from time to time: Once you get a taste of the wild, cooking the domesticated stuff can be a little too tame.

Purveyors We're Wild About

For duck, our preferred vendor is Joe Jurgielewicz & Son Family Farm. For boar and venison, look no further than Broken Arrow Ranch. Pheasant is available via Wild Fork Foods and Quattro's Poultry and Game, which also sells venison. Our favorite spatchcocked quail comes from Campo Grande.

<https://www.saveur.com/culture/cooking-wild-game/>