

# Eat Sheet: Game Meat

*You shouldn't play with wild animals—  
not without our top eating tips.*

**E**ven if your idea of wilderness is the golf course rough, you can embrace your primal side by eating like Daniel Boone. These days, elegant menus from New York to Napa are showcasing venison, pheasant, and other game animals with the same enthusiasm once reserved for dry-aged porterhouse.

Those looking for a change from beef may consider elk, venison, or even bison. Adventurous diners with a jones for pork can switch things up with wild boar, available either as a chop or a sausage that's a popular addition to Italian-style sauces and ragouts. Prefer white meat? Skip chicken breast and give pheasant, squab, or rabbit a shot (ahem).

Why this sudden fascination with game? For one thing, the meat tends to have fewer calories and less fat. "I think the health aspect is the biggest thing, but there's also a bit of nostalgia," says Ken Lingle, executive chef at The Sagamore resort in New York's Adirondack mountains, which serves venison and rabbit. "It's mysterious. The people that settled this land were eating this." In other words, it's the ultimate retro food gone haute.

**Where the Wild Things Were:** Game is generally defined as meat derived from animals that live in the wild, although your menu might say that a particular deer, rabbit, or boar came from a farm. That's because game that originates in the U.S. must be farmed, according to American regulations. For authentically wild flavors, some chefs import foodstuffs from Scotland and as far away as New Zealand.

**Lean and Mean:** Because even farmed game typically live in settings more free-range than feedlot and the animals have never been commercially bred for rapid weight gain, they're leaner than livestock, which is a boon for diners looking for food that's heart-healthy and hearty-tasting.

**A Matter of Taste:** Most chefs agree that the difference in taste between wild and farmed is substantial, though they're divided on the subject of whether that's a pro or a con. The wild stuff has a stronger, more assertive flavor; some say it's slightly liverlike, or draw comparisons to the tangy flavor of dry-aged steak. The taste of truly wild game also varies depending on what the animal eats during its life, so hints of grass or acorns are possible. "Wild game is gamier. That's what I want," says Terrance Brennan, owner of Picholine Restaurant and Artisanal Bistro in New York. John Besh, owner of Restaurant August in New Orleans, says that American palates often find milder farm-raised game more appealing.

**Always in Season:** Although American hunters are only allowed to enjoy their quarry during the late-fall and winter hunting seasons, the availability of farmed and imported animals means that restaurant diners who want to eat game can do so year-round.

**On the Menu:** To best experience the stronger flavor of game, look for dishes that pair it



with fruit or acid-based accompaniments. Tart berries like cranberries and huckleberries provide a pleasing contrast to the richness of the meat. Sauces or glazes featuring red wine or balsamic vinegar also show up frequently for the same reason. Game is often served with earthy vegetables like turnips, mushrooms, or even truffles. [LINK: <http://www.portfolio.com/culture-lifestyle/culture-inc/food-drink/2007/10/01/Truffle-Eating-Guide/>] With white meats like pheasant and rabbit, dishes that feature milder vegetables like leeks or cabbage prevent the game from being overpowered.

**Taking the Heat:** Since game animals are generally leaner than their barnyard counterparts, it takes a deft touch to avoid overcooking. Two strategies for keeping game succulent are using quick heat, such as roasting or pan frying, or wrapping the meat in pastry or cabbage so it cooks more slowly and gently. Adding a layer of bacon or other fat to the meat is another popular way of keeping a dish moist, as is braising or submerging it in liquid during cooking.

**A Rare Bird (or Chop or Steak):** Because game dries out so easily, many chefs cringe at the thought of serving it anywhere past

medium rare. If you can't stomach your meat less than well done, a game dish might not be your best choice. One alternative: Wild boar sausage, which is generally cooked in tomato-based sauces and served over pasta, is browned and cooked through the same way as conventional sausage.

**The Perfect Pour:** The bold, assertive flavors of game demand equally complex, robust wines. "In general, what I suggest is to think of matching the intensity level of the dish," says Adam Rieger, wine director for Bobby Flay's Bar American in New York. Zinfandel is great, he says, because its fruitiness and spiciness complement the meat as well as any fruit-based sauces. Culinary professionals say that wines from France's Rhône region also bring out the strong, sweet taste of many game meats. There are a few exceptions: Pheasant and rabbit pair best with a full-bodied white wine or a much lighter red like pinot noir, while the typically Italian preparations of wild boar better lend themselves to a robust Italian red wine.

— Martha White

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