

July 2007 Communiqué

Get your game on: Deciphering a diverse menu of meats

The menu at Bonnell's restaurant in Fort Worth, Texas features venison carpaccio, elk mini tacos, smoked quail, and buffalo tenderloin. Many Texans, including chef-owner John Bonnell, grew up hunting--and therefore eating--game birds and animals, and featuring these meats on the menu is a way for Bonnell to develop his approach to Texan cuisine, one "based on the best possible local ingredients," he says, including plenty of game.

Whether it's bison on menus in Colorado, elk on those in Arizona, or alligator on Louisiana menus, game meats reflect regional cuisines more aptly than beef, chicken, and pork--the domesticated animals we're all used to eating. Despite the regional associations, chefs across the U.S.--often those in large metropolitan areas where the restaurant markets are crowded and competitive--are turning to these protein sources to add a unique dimension to their menus.

Consumer demand for game meats has expanded in the past decade, and as diner's palates grow more adventurous, there is also rising concern about the origins of our food. "People are asking more and more questions," says Patricia Whisnant, grassfed beef farmer and president of the American Grassfed Association. She traces pasture-raised beef's rising popularity to this shift in consumer awareness, and points out that "grassfed beef is a bridge," to game meats like bison and venison.

Not all chefs are taught how to prepare and serve game during their culinary training, and for many, there's a learning curve involved when first learning to work with game meats. Questions of how to locate sustainably raised game; how to identify meats that have been properly slaughtered and dressed; and how to prepare and develop dishes featuring these proteins might all arise as chefs consider expanding their wild game repertoire.

In the Grass: What is wild?

The term *game* refers to wild animals and birds. Farm or ranch-raised game is regulated by the Food and Drug Administration and by voluntary USDA inspection. Game is also inspected by states, whose requirements often meet or exceed federal regulations. Classified apart from livestock, game animals raised on farms or ranches under the correct state and federal regulations can be sold commercially, although it is illegal to sell game that has been hunted for personal consumption.

Game animals roaming on Western ranches with thousands of acres aren't actively managed by the property owners, says Chris Hughes of Broken Arrow Ranch in Ingram, Texas. On these ranches--otherwise used for private or commercial hunting purposes--animals like deer, antelope, and wild boar are not tracked or monitored other than for reasons of population control, says Hughes. So although the game animals live on someone's property, they remain undomesticated.

Bison: A North American Native

Unlike the so-called exotic (non-native) deer, antelope, and feral boar species that thrive in parts of the U.S., bison is indigenous to North America. The bison population was once as high as 60 million, according to the USDA, though aggressive hunting brought the animals close to extinction by the end of the 19th century.

Today, bison is a popular choice among consumers who are concerned about the health risks of conventionally raised meats. Pasture or ranch-raised bison is lower in saturated fat and cholesterol than grain-fed beef, and (like all grassfed animals) has higher levels of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Bison meat can be substituted in any recipe that calls for beef--from stews and burgers to seared tenderloin and even bison jerky. It has a deep, clean taste that can be hard to describe, says producer Hugh Fitzsimons of Thunder Heart Bison in South Texas. "There's no real description for the flavor," he says. "It just tastes like itself."

"The local food movement has helped bring awareness to our product," says the rancher, who sells Thunder Heart bison to grocery stores and hamburger chains around Texas and at the Austin, TX farmers market. Whether people are seeking bison, beef, or other meats, Fitzsimons says the bottom line is this: "Don't buy meat from strangers. You have to put a face to the food."

Many of these animals find their way to restaurant kitchens through the operations at Broken Arrow Ranch. By helping ranches with their population control programs, the company brings wild venison, antelope, and boar to the national fine dining market. A decrease of natural predators on rangelands means that surplus populations of deer, antelope, and boar can result in overgrazing and resource depletion. Broken Arrow identifies animals of an appropriate age and size and "field harvests" them, bringing a mobile slaughtering unit to the ranches.

Field harvesting eliminates the need to transport the animals to slaughter, an often stressful process for the animals. But whether in the field or not, careful and humane processing reduces animal stress, which translates to higher quality wild meat. AGA president Whisnant explains how animals that sense fear or feel threatened will experience a surge of adrenaline that results in lactic acid build-up in the muscles. The acidity and contractions in the muscles turns the meat tough and also intensifies the gamey flavor that many people find unpleasant. Whether harvesting boar, antelope, deer, or other species like elk or bison, "gentle handling makes a difference in the final tenderness of the meat," says Whisnant.

Around the world: Farm-raised deer

In the U.S., venison is one of the most well-known and widely available game meats. At least 75% of venison on the market in the U.S. is imported from New Zealand, the world's largest producer of farm-raised deer. For chefs who prefer working with local and seasonal ingredients, the prospect of using imported venison on their menus might not be appealing. But as we work to decipher the larger idea of sustainability, the story of New Zealand venison is a compelling one, regardless of whether you favor local and regional foods.

Since 1984, New Zealand agriculture has been subsidy-free. Though the initial removal of subsidies meant lean times for farmers there, agricultural production has increased by an average of 5.9% since 1986. Once heavily subsidized, sheep farming has declined, while dairy, beef, and venison have all expanded and helped to diversify New Zealand agriculture. Due to New Zealand's mild climate and wealth of pasture, livestock there is raised year-round on the sustainable model of grass-based production. The country's venison industry, led by

FURTHER RESOURCES

To learn more about wild game species and how they are regulated, visit the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the USDA: www.fsis.usda.gov. Enter "wild game" into the search engine.

*To source wild and farm-raised game, visit: www.thunderheartbison.com
www.brokenarrowranch.com
www.cervena.com*

*To learn more about bison, visit: www.bisoncentral.com
www.itbcbison.com*

To learn more about New Zealand agriculture, visit: www.newfarm.org. Enter "New Zealand agriculture" into the search engine.

the Cervena brand, developed as a response to the new marketplace farmers faced after subsidy removal. Farmers were forced to adapt to the market rather than depend on subsidies, and identified venison as an ideal product: there was an overpopulation of red deer, which had been introduced to the island and faced no native predators; and there was a strong demand from European countries where venison is a long-standing culinary tradition. Twenty years later, New Zealand exports 25 thousand tons of venison annually, with the U.S. as the second largest market behind Europe.

The principles guiding each chef through his or her purchasing decisions--and diners through their menu choices--might not align with bringing venison in from New Zealand over a similar product from the U.S. But with our own heavily subsidized agriculture industry under scrutiny for contributing to a food system with misguided priorities, the New Zealand model offers some perspective. "There's not necessarily a contradiction between being sustainable and being on the other side of the world," says NZ deer industry representative Innes Moffat.

In the Restaurant: Cooking and serving game

Knowing how and where the animals were raised are important factors when making purchasing decisions. The next step is learning how to work with the meats once they find their way into the kitchen. Many American-trained chefs

don't learn about game in cooking school. During his culinary training, says chef John Bonnell, "rabbit was as exotic as it got."

Because these animals have lean muscles and little fat, a low-and-slow cooking process helps keep the meat tender. With game meat, both excess blood and fat contribute to a dark color and strong smell. This gamey quality is minimized when blood is thoroughly drained during processing and when fat is trimmed. To rid game meats of excess blood in the kitchen, you can soak cuts in milk or in a marinade or brine that includes cider vinegar.

With a dining public curious about new flavors and concerned about food origins as well as nutrition, game (low in saturated fat and cholesterol) shouldn't be a tough sell. Chef John Sharpe, owner of the Turquoise Room in Winslow, Arizona, says his elk medallions outsell many entrees on his menu. "Their perceived value is really high," he says, due to those customers seeking a dining experience that reflects the area around them. For John Bonnell in Texas, bison tenderloin is a top seller. Both chefs suggest pairing game meats with robust regional flavors--Sharpe serves his elk medallions with a black currant-port sauce and corn flan; Bonnell often serves his bison with green chile-cheese grits, he says.

For Bonnell, Sharpe, and other Collaborative members, developing regionally-influenced game dishes is a way to add value to the menu without sacrificing food cost. Integrating game meats into the kitchen's repertoire sharpens a cook's skills while exposing diners to new flavors and healthy protein sources. Whether you choose to source game from Texas or from family farms in New Zealand, these meats are a sustainable source of diversity in the kitchen and at the table.

Chefs Collaborative communiqués promote sustainable purchasing practices in restaurants.

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