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## FOOD & DRINK

# The (Wild) Game Plan for Fall Cooking

Your guide to cooking venison, quail, bison and more that's tender, juicy and only as flavorful as it should be. These days, 'gamey' is a compliment

*By Kathleen Squires*

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**It was a chilly** day last fall in north central Oregon. With Mt. Hood looming in the distance, I hunted game: venison, bison, quail and a menagerie of other wild creatures.

There was, however, no need for weaponry—beyond a fork. Along with 500-odd others, I was tasting game prepared during a cook-off at the annual Wild About Game festival, which runs again this weekend in Welches, Ore. I recall some exquisite rabbit, made fierce by a Scotch bonnet consommé; partridge tucked into a phyllo hand pie; and venison, emboldened with sweet pepper curry and spiced yogurt raita. The selection ranged from hearty comfort food to more refined dishes and drew on a global pantry for their flavors.

Yet all of them had something in common: Not a one tasted “gamey.” At least not in the pejorative sense. The experience was so enjoyable it caused me to wonder why the adjective “gamey” is rarely a compliment.

**A strong, off-putting flavor, a tough texture:** These are the connotations that



Venison With Shell Bean and Sweet Pepper Curry and Spiced Raita at Bollywood. PHOTO: DINA AVILA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

drove Geoff Latham to found the Wild About Game festival 16 years ago. “People kept telling me they didn’t like venison because it tasted gamey,” said Mr.



The chef's counter and pizza oven at Nostrana Restaurant in Portland, OR. PHOTO: DINA AVILA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Latham, president and founder of game purveyor Nicky USA. “That convinced me I needed to educate people about the versatility and flavor of consistently raised, correctly harvested, properly cooked game.”

The “gaminess” complaint strikes a chord with others in the business. “My first reaction is to think that there is a certain psychology involved,” said Ariane Daguin, owner of D’Artagnan, the New Jersey-based meat and game purveyor. “These people are usually remembering some game their uncle shot and then put in the freezer for three years and then braised to death.” Lance Appelbaum, president and CEO of Fossil Farms put it bluntly: “If your game tastes too ‘gamey,’ then you’re cooking it wrong.”

A mainstreaming movement is afoot. Consider last fall’s introduction of a venison sandwich at Arby’s, piloted in 17 restaurants in 6 states. “We chose to launch in states where deer hunting is extremely popular, because we knew if deer hunters and guests who grew up eating venison approved of our product, then we were onto something,” said Arby’s CMO Rob Lynch. Hourlong waits and

*‘These people are usually remembering some game their uncle shot and then braised to death.’*

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sellouts were reported upon the sandwich’s debut in Tennessee, Georgia, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Even beyond those states, game meat is popping up at butcher counters and in supermarkets such as Mariano’s in Chicago, New Seasons in Oregon and Whole Foods nationwide.

It seems the American public—at least a wider public, beyond those who hunt their own game—is finally finding this kind of meat easier to swallow. To enjoy the best of hunting season, those more comfortable with wielding a pan than a rifle should follow a few rules of thumb offered by professionals adept at cooking game.

**Pace yourself.** “I tell people who think they don’t like the strength of game to start with quail, then work their way up to stronger-tasting meats,” said Ms. Daguin. “To me, quail is game 101—a game bird that is very mild but still recognizable.”

**Sourcing is key.** “Buy from a reliable source, and get fresh if you can. If not, go for cry-o-vacced,” said Michael Lomonaco, chef/owner of Porter House in New York City. “Frozen yields a different kind of product. It tends to draw the moisture out of the meat, so that it becomes dehydrated when defrosted.”

**The closer you get to the source, the better.** Chef Georgia Pellegrini, author of “Girl Hunter: Revolutionizing the Way We Eat, One Hunt at a Time,” takes groups of women on hunting expeditions in the Arkansas Delta. On her



Qualgje con Fichi at Nostrana Restaurant in Portland, OR. PHOTO: DINA AVILA FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

**Adventure Getaways, women learn how to hunt and how to correctly field-dress, butcher and cook game.**

**Age matters.** Ms. Pellegrini advocates aging game meat, whether hunted fresh or bought at the butcher. “Aging tends to make the meat more tender and removes a lot of that strong flavor.” Ms. Pellegrini also recommends brining and marinating meats to lock moisture in before cooking.

**Select the correct cooking method for the cut.** Novices might consider braise-friendly cuts, such as shoulder or leg, said Troy MacLarty, chef/owner of Bollywood Theater in Portland, Ore. Mr. MacLarty was the 2016 People’s Choice Award winner at the Wild About Game cook-off for his venison chops. “When cooking loin or chops, err on the side of undercooking,” he said. “They should never be cooked more than medium-rare.” According to chef Mario Viguie of Restaurant 1858 at the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, “Smoking is always a great way to go with game. It helps take away the iron taste and imparts a great layer of flavor.” For tender cuts, he does a fast char over high heat on a grill.

**Choose the right accompaniments.** Cathy Whims, chef/owner of Nostrana in Portland, Ore., and winner of the first Wild About Game competition, favors fruit with game meats, as it tends to complement the flavor. She also endorses adding a fatty element. “Wrapping a game meat in bacon balances the leanness and makes the texture less intense.”

With these recipes—whether using bird or beast, cooking low-and-slow or high-and-fast—you can put these chefs’ advice into action. Game on.

## Venison With Shell Bean and Sweet Pepper Curry and Spiced Raita

**Time:** 50-60 minutes **Serves:** 6

*For the curry:*



SOMETHING WILD Chef Gregory Gourdet of Departure in Portland, Ore., cooking wild boar sausage and rice wrapped in banana leaves at last fall's Wild About Game festival. PHOTO: JOHN VALLS

- 3 red bell peppers
- 2 tablespoons olive oil

- 2 teaspoons cumin seeds
- 1 red onion, roughly chopped
- 2 teaspoons minced ginger
- 6 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 1 serrano chile, stemmed and thinly sliced
- 2 teaspoons curry powder
- 1 teaspoon garam masala
- 1 large tomato, roughly chopped
- 5 cups cooked fresh shell beans, such as kala chana or red choir, with cooking liquid
- Kosher salt

***For the spiced raita:***

- ¼ cup olive oil
- ½ teaspoon cumin seeds
- ½ teaspoon Nigella seeds
- ½ teaspoon black mustard seeds
- 10 curry leaves, roughly chopped
- 2 dried Indian red chiles, stemmed, seeded and roughly chopped
- 2 cups whole yogurt
- Kosher salt

***For the venison:***

- 2 pounds venison loin
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Olive oil for searing
- Flatbread, such as naan, for serving

**1. Make curry:** Use tongs to hold sweet peppers directly over burner on stove top and cook, turning, until charred all over. Place charred peppers in a paper bag and seal. Let peppers steam in bag 10 minutes. Remove peppers and peel away skin. Remove stems, halve peppers and remove seeds. Roughly chop peppers and set aside

**2.** In a heavy medium pot, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add cumin seeds and toast, stirring frequently, until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add onions and cook, stirring often, until deeply browned, 5-8 minutes. Add ginger, garlic and serranos, and cook, stirring frequently, until aromatic, about 2 minutes. Add curry powder and garam masala, and cook, stirring frequently, 1 minute more. Add tomatoes and cook until liquid evaporates and oil begins to separate, 6-8 minutes. Add beans with liquid and reduce heat to low. Add skinned, chopped sweet peppers and simmer to develop flavors, 15 minutes. Add enough water to create a soupy consistency. Season with salt to taste. Cover and set aside.

**3.** Make spiced raita: Heat oil in a small saucepan over medium heat. Add cumin seeds, Nigella seeds, mustard seeds, curry leaves and chiles. Cook until leaves are crisp and lightly browned, about 1 minute. In a medium bowl, combine yogurt and toasted spices. Season with salt. Set aside.

**4.** Generously season venison all over with salt and pepper. Let sit at room temperature 30 minutes.

**5.** Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat a large ovenproof skillet with oil and set over medium-high heat. Once hot, add venison loin and sear, turning, until browned all over, about 5 minutes. Transfer skillet to oven and cook until an instant-read thermometer inserted at thickest point reads 125 degrees, 5-10 minutes.

**6.** Transfer venison to a cutting board and let rest at least 10 minutes before slicing. Slice venison across the grain and serve over shell bean curry with dollop of spiced raita and flatbread on the side.

—Adapted from *Troy MacLarty of Bollywood Theater, Portland, Ore.*

## Ground Boar Green Chile

*Chef Mario Viguie likes to work with boar as it is native to Colorado. This dish reflects the unique flavors of the various green chile peppers included in it.*

**Active Time:** 70 minutes **Total Time:** 3 hours  
**Serves:** 8-12



Green Chili from Restaurant 1858 PHOTO: CHAD CHISHOLM/CUSTOM CREATIONS

- 5 pounds tomatillos, husks removed and halved
- 1 cup garlic cloves
- 4 yellow onions, quartered
- 6 poblano chiles, stemmed, seeded and quartered

- 3 jalapeño chiles, seeded and halved length-wise
- 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup cumin seeds
- 10 ears corn, shucked
- 5 pounds ground boar
- 1 pound (16 ounces) frozen Hatch green chiles
- 2 bunches cilantro, stems removed, roughly chopped
- ½ cup fresh oregano leaves, chopped

**1.** Preheat oven to 500 degrees. In a large bowl, toss tomatillos, garlic, onions, poblanos and jalapeños with 1/2 cup olive oil. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer to a baking sheet and sprinkle with cumin seeds. Bake until fully roasted, about 25 minutes. Set aside and let cool until ready to use.

**2.** In a large bowl, toss corn with 1/2 cup olive oil. Season with salt and pepper. Transfer to a baking sheet and roast in oven until vegetables are soft and have a dark, roasted color, about 10 minutes. When cool enough to handle, cut kernels from cobs.

**3.** In a large pot, heat remaining olive oil over medium heat and add ground boar. Season with salt and pepper. Cook until perfectly brown, about 15 minutes. Carefully drain fat from pot. Stir in corn.

**4.** Use a blender or food processor to puree half the roasted vegetables until smooth. Transfer pureed vegetables to ground boar mixture. Roughly chop remaining roasted vegetables and add to pot along with 16 cups water.

**5.** Add remaining ingredients and season to taste with salt and pepper. Simmer chili until flavor is deep and rich and texture of boar is retained (not mushy), 2 hours. Serve with a side of tortilla chips or cornbread.

—Adapted from Mario Viguie of Restaurant 1858, The Broadmoor, Colorado Springs, Colo.

## Quail with Figs

*Pan searing before finishing in the oven is the key to retaining moisture in this recipe, which was declared winner at the first annual Nicky USA Wild About Game competition in 2000. Chef Cathy Whims has a special fondness for quail since her father often hunted it when she was growing up.*

**Total Time:** 1 hour **Serves:** 4

*For the fig jam:*

- 1/3 cup granulated sugar
- Juice from 1 medium lemon
- 1 pint fresh figs, halved and stemmed, or reconstituted dried figs
- 1 teaspoon lemon zest

*For the quail*

- 8 semi-boneless quail
- Salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 slices of bacon or pancetta, diced
- 1 large shallot, diced
- ½ cup dry Marsala wine
- 1 cup chicken stock, reduced over high heat to 1/3 cup
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme
- ¼ teaspoon finely grated lemon zest

**1. Make fig jam:** Place sugar and lemon juice in a small pot over medium heat. Stir in figs and zest. Cook until syrupy, 30-35 minutes.

**2. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.** Wash and dry quail and sprinkle cavities with salt and pepper. Stuff each quail with ½ a fig pulled from fig jam.

**3.** Heat olive oil in a large frying pan. Sauté bacon until the fat renders and the bacon browns, about 4 minutes. Remove bacon and reserve, leaving fat in the pan.

**4.** Set pan with bacon fat over medium-high heat. Cook quail in bacon fat, breast-side down, until browned, 3 minutes. Flip and repeat on other side. Add shallot and sauté to soften, 30 seconds. Remove pan from heat, pour in Marsala, and carefully tilt pan to burner to ignite. When flames stop, transfer quail to a baking dish and set frying pan aside, reserving Marsala. Transfer baking dish to oven and roast quail until just cooked through and meat feels spongy to touch, about 6 minutes. Arrange quail on a warmed platter.

**5.** Set pan with Marsala over high heat, add reduced chicken stock, thyme and lemon zest, and cook to reduce to a syrupy glaze, 3-5 minutes. Add fig jam to taste and bring to a boil. Pour hot glaze over quail. Serve over creamy polenta, if you like.

*—Adapted from Cathy Whims of Nostrana, Portland, Ore.*

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