



You Got Game

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

Can you look at a party of six and predict who will play it safe with chicken or beef and who will zero right in on the antelope or buffalo special? Not likely. Diners who enjoy wild game range from hunters to the health-conscious, from well-informed gourmands to risk-takers who leap at the chance to try something new. And then there are those first-timers who need a little coaxing.

Tina Martlage, manager of Lon's at the Hermosa Inn says, "About 60% of the time, we have to persuade our customers to try a game dish." Antelope is the most popular at Lon's, and is also the servers' favorite thing to sell. "They love selling something different, and once they talk people into it, the reaction is always very positive."

Health benefits are one significant selling point with game, which is much lower in fat and cholesterol than other meats. Rick Worriow, owner of Gourmet Imports Wild Game, reports that game consumption has increased five to ten percent over the past five years, which he attributes to the increased promotion of game as a healthier red meat alternative.

Ivan Flowers, head chef at a Different Pointe of View, thinks that's why women are more likely to order game than men are.

"It reflects a time when the man always ordered steak, and the woman went with something lighter, like chicken or fish. I think people are basically carnivores, and eating game is a great way to eat meat without guilt."

The widespread impression that game is a seasonal, cool-weather item is rooted in the historical fact that lack of refrigeration used to make meat preservation difficult if not impossible during the warmer months. Although many in the restaurant business think that serving game is becoming less of a seasonal activity than it used to be, Mike Hughes of the Broken Arrow Ranch in Texas says his sales of deer, antelope, and boar to restaurants across the country are still 50 percent higher in the winter.

Venison, antelope, buffalo and elk are the most popular items among customers, supporting Worriow's sense that when people experiment with a new palate, they begin with venison before progressing to buffalo, and then boar. Ostrich seems to have fallen out of favor since its trendy popularity in the 90's.

"Ostrich was a novelty item," says Steve Calvert of Denver's House of Smoke. "If people ordered it once, and it wasn't cooked correctly, they wrote it off because it just wasn't very good."

"Many people jumped on the ostrich bandwagon," says Sandy Garcia, chef de cuisine at the Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort. "but as other types of game became available, we just moved on to things like antelope, squab, and mallard duck."

Several chefs mention wild hare, with its strong taste, and squab, with its dark red, liver-like texture as the items customers are least likely to order, but Garcia just had great response to the seared breast of squab on his New Year's Eve tasting menu. As with all game, the key is in the cooking.

"If squab is done right - cooked just to medium rare it should stay moist, and combine the gaminess of dove with the texture of quail."

But there are times when Valley game-eaters leave the deer and the birds behind and venture into much wilder territory. Worriow supplies more exotic meats like lion, hippo, and zebra on a special order basis - usually for "large prestigious events where there are a lot of wheeler-dealers present, like the Barrett Jackson Auction or the PGA Golf Tournament." Asked if that means that the people

who frequent those events have sophisticated palates, he laughs.

"Probably not. It's more about the 'snob appeal' of being able to say they ate something so unusual."

Some chefs feel that in order to really understand how to prepare game, it helps to have some direct experience with the animals outside the four walls of a kitchen. Flowers says, "cooking game is a state of mind," and explains that it was working as a butcher during his college days that taught him the finer points of cooking game.

"There's a very specific feel to each piece of game. When you butcher an animal, you can see the lack of fat, you can see the skeletal structure. It helps you understand why sliding a knife through a piece of game feels completely different from cutting into a piece of beef."

Similarly, Fernando Divina, chef at Lon's at the Hermosa Inn, feels that spending time with hunters helped him master game cooking.

"When you dress an animal in the field, you aren't frivolous with it in the kitchen. You really value what you bag, and you gain an appreciation from participating in the whole process."

Game recipes from Arizona kitchens range from the simple to the complex, with variations that sound like they could tempt even the least adventurous diner. Vincent Guerithault loves cooking game with marinades, "like I was taught to do thirty years ago." He soaks venison or wild hare loins for two days to a week in a red wine marinade, makes a stock from the marinated bones and more red wine, and serves the resulting sauce over thinly sliced, sautéed pieces of meat.

Divina short-brines an antelope shoulder for 4-6 hours, after which he wraps it with wild boar bacon, sears it, and roasts it.

Reed Groban, executive chef and director of food and beverage for the Fairmont Scottsdale Princess, does a seared and sautéed rabbit loin, which is wrapped in ham, paired with braised veal cheeks, and served with a garbanzo bean and blood sausage ragout.

Garcia likes to prepare a bacon-wrapped quail which is stuffed with pork carnitas, roasted, and served on a johnnycake with caramelized sacaton onions.

Flowers, who emphasizes the need for acidic sauces to compliment game, offers three favorite ways to cook venison: a roasted venison chop in a garlic basil breadcrumb with a cassis garlic demi-glace; a venison filet mignon seared in white truffle

Do those people have sophisticated palates, or is it more about the 'snob appeal' of being able to say they ate something so unusual?

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raspberry butter with a roasted blackberry demi-glace; and an osso bucco braised with 15-year-old sherry.

The way in which the game is harvested is a serious consideration when chefs choose the vendors they use. Divina praises the Broken Arrow Ranch, saying that he buys game from Hughes because his process is "natural, ecologically sound, and humane."

On Hughes' ranches, the deer and antelope are free ranging, feeding on natural grasses and other vegetation on thousands of fenced acres. Divina would never buy from a place where "the animals are raised in pens, with no moral consideration for their well-being."

When animals are raised in crowded pens, and then transported in vans to slaughterhouses, the process induces considerable stress. The stress increases the flow of adrenalin, which increases lactic acid in the muscles, resulting in a tough, poorer quality of meat. In contrast, Hughes harvests animals with a single shot to the head from a very long range, ensuring that the animals never experience the stress of being chased and hunted. The result is a humane death and a higher meat quality.

Worrilow's concern for the treatment of the animals that land in his customers' kitchens underlies his ability to combine a personal support of animal rights causes with a livelihood as a wild game purveyor. He rationalizes the two seemingly disparate perspectives in this way: "I'm sort of like Schindler in Schindler's List.. People are going to eat game, regardless.....so I try to make sure animals live properly, are cultivated and treated well, and taken care of before they are harvested as game."

Even though game is more expensive than other meats, that



doesn't automatically mean the margins are worse.

"The margins can be just as good as they are with other meats, because people who are accustomed to ordering game automatically expect that the price will be higher," says Guerithault. "For example, you might serve an eight oz. top beef tenderloin and charge \$28-\$32, but you would serve a five-six oz. portion of venison and charge about \$32."

Groban takes the opposite tack, explaining that his margins aren't as good because he purposely prices game lower than other meats in an effort to appeal to novice game-eaters.

"It's all about educating the public and encouraging them to try new things. So, if we price a beef filet at \$38, we might price the venison at \$35. I'd rather price it lower and have it sell."

Flowers says that butchering his own meat at the restaurant is a very cost-effective way to serve game. Instead of buying a rack of venison at \$18.95/pound, he can buy a saddle of venison for \$8.95/pound, turn on his band saw, and get several cuts of meat for a number of different dishes.

For carnivores who are willing to ante up for something different, something healthy, or simply something to talk about....there's no problem finding Arizona chefs who can take them on culinary adventures to where the buffalo roam and the antelope play. The game is on, the chefs are in, and the diners are winning.