

A Wild Game Adventure

By Helen Goelet

“I made a bear-bourguignon the other night,” Wendy says, her blue eyes widening in reminiscence, “and I mean,” she shakes her head, thin lines stretching from the corners of her now closed eyes. She sighs and emits an unknowing moan of play-back pleasure.

“That meat, it just melted in my mouth. Just fell apart,” she says. A delicately prideful smile crosses her face as she describes her complex preparation, from searing each cube of the dark meat, to each precisely timed pour of thick red wine into the long-cooking pot of her kill.

I know that smile. It comes from the sound of knife on board, the resonant chop in a silent room; the soft swish of blade through onion and sweet, stinging aroma that follows; the rush of heat that rises from the sizzling, sweating strings as they hit ribbons of oil on the pan. My muscles melt from my control and shift into autopilot. I’m in my happy place.

There’s nothing that makes me happier than cooking a meal for others (with the exception perhaps of a really good, fresh beer). From the prep, to the hot, action filled, time-intensive moments of *oh shit am I going to screw this up!?* to finally serving my food and watching people enjoy the fruits of my labor: each moment is its own pocket of bliss. I like organization, to a certain degree, but I’m a big time thrill seeker and adventurer. In the kitchen, I get it all.

Going to college in Vermont, I’ve been surrounded by the hunting life-style for four years, but have somehow never delved into it. With four weeks left in my college

career, I decided it was time I got to know a little more about the people and place I was leaving. With my love of cooking and my body's rebellion to the bitterness of winter, (and convenient lack of a hunting season in the month of January), I stumbled upon the solution to my final days: learning how to cook wild game.

I.

Chris Cartier is a private fishing/hunting guide; dog owner, trainer and admirer; beer drinker, lover and connoisseur; friend, customer and thinker.

"The best part about the hunt is watching Tommy go," Chris says, his ice-blue eyes wandering from the empty tasting glass in his hand to the white-and black streak of fur now whizzing from the tasting room into the back of the brewery.

"Oh," he says, putting his glass down and pulling his phone out of his pocket. Classic Chris. "Check out this great shot I got of him with the grouse."

Tommy's smiling up, a brown pile of feathers hanging from his mouth. The tiny head of the bird hangs like a pebble from its thin neck. I take the glass from his hand, and give him another short pour of the Christmas Cake Ale. I can't stomach it, but he loves the pure-cakiness of Drop-In's seasonal addition.

"It tastes like cake," he says, gulping the brown, liquid pastry down, "and I just love cake!"

Stuffed Quail over Winter Wild-Rice

For the Quail

6 butterflied quail (room temperature)
6 strips bacon
1 butternut squash, diced into 1x1 inch cubes
4 tbsp fresh sage, finely chopped
4 tbsp balsamic vinegar
2 tbsp olive oil
2 tsp ground cumin
½ tsp ground chili pepper
1 cup chopped walnuts
1 tbsp dark honey
1 tsp chili powder
1 tsp cinnamon
salt and pepper to season
6 wooden skewers

For the Wild Rice

2 cups wild rice
6 cups water
1 red onion cut into thin strips
1 bag fresh spinach
4 fresh medjool dates

I'm staring at a butterflied quail. At the top left and right corners, two tiny, spiked elbows point in varying directions through a thin layer of white filmy skin. At the bottom, the smallest drumsticks I've ever seen lay splayed. Connecting the square is about 4x4 inches of surprisingly red meat. As I pat it dry with a paper towel, a thin piece of flesh comes away with the dry paper. Shit, that's tender. And flimsy. I'm going to have to be really careful not to tear it in half.

I close my eyes. My neck crackles as I roll it slowly to the right, back and left. My shoulders drop. I take a deep breath. The kitchen is quiet.

I dig my fingers into the stuffing: small orange squares of roasted butternut squash mixed with little pieces of spiced walnuts tossed in a balsamic-sage marinade.

Two small fingerfulls are almost too much. Now to fold and truss. Okay. I pick up the



left wing and try to bring as much of the remaining, white neck-skin over the spilling stuffing as I bring the right wing to meet in the middle. The point of my skewer pops through the skin with ease. In one side, out the other, back through like a stitch until the legs. This is what suturing a wound must be like.

Now...dun dun dunnnn: bacon. It seems every time someone says bacon, or sees it on a menu

or in a recipe or hears it or smells it or the thought and image of this crisp, brown slab of meat dripping with grease just floats into someone's mind, the world suddenly becomes a brighter place. I don't really get it myself, but hey, sometimes you just have to bite your

pride and please the Man. So I wrap my beautifully stuffed and trussed quail with a layer of meat so fatty it plasters to the birds little body. Quail in a blanket anyone?



Now for the searing.

A quick tangent on searing: when in doubt, do it. We've all gnawed on the dry, flavorless, overcooked chunk of chicken. In fact, most of us grew up on that. But I've seen people dig into their first moist, pink, chicken breast, watched the flavors burst on their tongue as the chew into the experience, their eyes growing wide with the revelation of a new meat

that they've eaten their entire lives yet never tasted before. Flavor's the name of the game, and searing's how to maintain.

So, I've assembled some more balsamic vinegar and freshly copped sage to dip the treasure-filled pink pockets of flesh into. The light-green extra-virgin olive oil ribbons onto the now-hot iron skillet on the stove. I love these pans. God, I need to invest in my kitchen-wear. My friend is conveniently house sitting for someone who clearly cooks, and cares about her goods. Thank you Amanda for letting me come crash it.

A hiss and spit erupts from the pan as I drop quail one, then two, and each following subject onto its hot, black surface. After two minutes, I flip them, then transfer them into the patiently waiting, oh so beautiful "Le Creuset" clay pot. With a short series

of clangs and bangs and a brief warm breeze, the birds will now roast in the oven for about ten minutes.

Meanwhile, I sauté thin strips of red onion in the remaining balsamic-sage concoction, and at the last moment throw a bag of spinach into the succulently steaming strings just until their dry green leaves wilt to a wet, dark mossy color. From the pan, the mess joins some pre-boiled wild rice and I toss it all together. Next, I chop the Medjool dates into small pieces, and damn it if each individual little piece doesn't just glue itself to my blade. After peeling each square from the steel and placing them carefully on top of the rice, I rim the heap with the remaining stuffing. With the oranges, browns and greens, I just want to burry my face into the warm wintry mess. Wait. Patience.

Times up. I fling open the oven-door and shove my face into a gust of hot air. Well, that hurt...as always. You'd think I'd have learned, but apparently there's no Pavlovian tie yet between my excited impatience and the inevitable sting of the scorching oven. After a breath of cooling air, I reach in and pull out the pot and look at the legs. Like dress-day in March, it's all about the legs. With quail, I was told you can tell that it's ready when the bone of the leg is showing. You *don't* want to over-cook this bird, otherwise, it tastes and feels like paper on your tongue. I think I see bone, yeah, that's white, not pink or red, not meaty, I'll say bone. And of course, the sizzling smell of bacon.

From the pot I place each steaming piece onto the rice. Et voila:



Dinner is served.

II.

Doug Butler was my first Vermonter friend. On his dairy farm just seven minutes out from Middlebury's pristine, collegiate campus, Doug trains his racing dogs. No, I don't mean grey hounds. I mean sled-pulling, ice breaking, snow plowing dogs. They've taken Doug across Vermont, New Hampshire, and a slew of Canadian terrain at speeds I'd far prefer under the warmth of a sun rather than the whipping cold of deepest northern winter.

"Don't move," Doug says springing from his chair, his eyes shining like Jack Nicolson in the Shining. His wiry, grey, shoulder-length haired head, disappears as he bounds from the kitchen down a dark, narrow hallway.

“Bear season’s like Christmas to Doug,” Tommy says, taking a sip of his DD coffee and laughing affectionately.

“Grrrrrrrr!”

What was Doug is now covered in a blanket of black fur, a large gaping mouth of teeth, and vacant, marble-like eyes. A second, smaller skinned bear trails behind.

“This one,” Doug says throwing his animal cloak onto the floor with a triumphant flourish and smiling maniacally, “biggest bear yet. 240 lbs.”

That doesn’t seem that big.

“Average bear’s 120,” he says reading my blank face.

That can’t be right. I weigh as much as a bear?

“I was sittin’ in a tree, it was gettin’ dark,” he says, sitting down, his snow-cloud grey eyes looking straight at me. It’s story time. “We’re in Maine, Northern Maine, hadn’t started drinking yet. I’m sittin’ way up in the tree...I’m thinkin’, well, it’s time to get out of here.”

He takes a bite of the egg sandwich I brought him. Chews twice. Swallows.

“I look down, here’s a bear right there. He walks, thirty, forty yards from me, turns sideways and I shot ‘im through the shoulder so he goes right down.” Doug claps his dry hands together. The bear’s down for the count.

“Rolled right over and I can see all four feet up in the air...He’s in a hole of dark cedars, I look down to reload and look back and cant see ‘im,” he slaps his leg, “ah well it’s gettin’ dark. Grab a flashlight and I run down; there’s the hole there’s the blood, no bear.” He pauses and looks at me for dramatic effect. I give him my wide-eyed look of horror, not that I have to pretend, because I’m thinking *oh shit*.

“I go uhoh, so I’m lookin around, and I can hear some noise ahead of me, and I hear him take off...couldn’t find him...turn the flashlight off, hear some thrashing in the thick bushes, put my flashlight back in my mouth, came around and he’s laying on his back, *Arrrr* , he reaches over to this tree, grabs it in his jaws, and died.”

Doug shakes his grizzly hair.

“It was such a rush. I mean, you can get high all you want, but a rush like that was just unbelievable.

Black Bear Brown Beer Chili

Chili

2 lbs minced black bear
2 tbsp olive oil
1 white onion, diced
4 cloves garlic, diced
1 red bell pepper, diced
1 yellow bell pepper, diced
1 green chili pepper, seeded and diced
1/3 cup chili powder
1 tbsp ground cumin
1 tbsp dried oregano
6 oz tomato paste
2 tbsp chili paste
12 oz Heart Of Lothian by Drop-In Brewery
14 oz diced tomatoes
2x15 oz canned black beans, rinsed and drained
15 oz canned kidney beans, rinsed and drained
2 tbsp shaved, extra dark chocolate

Serve with a dollop of sour cream

For a red meat, this is surprisingly burgundy.

“It’s a rich meat,” Wendy says holding her freezer-packed, minced bear out to me.

“Nice and fatty. Good for sausage, Bolognese, that kind of thing.”

I take her kill into my hands. Bolognese? Burger? Oh, maybe chili could be interesting. Very Vermont.



“Thank you so so much, you’re saving my ass on this.”

She waves her hand at me.

“I’m so excited about you’re project, are you kidding? Enjoy!”

As I walk out of her office, bearing the bear in hand, an all-too known yet consistently surprising gust of dry January wind cuts through my skin right down to my bones. Chili it will be.

I let the bear thaw during class so it would be room temperature. It feels just



about right. After laying everything out, I'm ready to go.

First step is to make those onions sweat. A stinging stream of tears, the dicing of two bell peppers and one green chili later, the white, yellow, red and green cubes hit the hot

pan with a familiar singing sizzle. There's almost nothing I love more than watching those dense white squares steam and sweat. I relish each gulp of hot the rising stems of sweet steam. The combination of the onion's bitter-sweet scent and the peppers freshness is like a drug.

Now for the big guy: enter the Cabernet-hued beast. Look at those white chunks,



not flecks, chunks. Pure fat. It's almost like squishy salami.

I slice the bag open with my knife, and out comes the most moist ground meat I've ever held in my fingers. It oozes between my fingers when I squeeze, and

god does that feel good. What is that smell, too? I can't place it. It's not that same raw, meaty smell I associate with beef. It's almost earthy, and it sinks deep into my chest when I breathe it in. Heady. I've got to stop playing with my food.

Finally manage to drop the meat into the pan and now I have to make sure it doesn't cook into clumps, but rather browns evenly and neatly into tight, round clumps.

I add the tomato paste next tints this colorful mélange red and I'm starting to see the more dog-food-like characteristics of chili emerge. Have you ever grilled a



tomato? Sounds messy, I know, but it's worth it just for that fiery, toasted smell of slightly burnt tomato. Anyway, that smell is starting to rise, so I add my favorite ingredient: *Heart of Lothian*. Unlike the Grizzly, this brown beer is surprisingly light in texture and body, but like its fierce pun of a brother, there's no lack of flavor or personality. I'm hoping its chocolaty, nutty, and slight coffee tastes will subtly accentuate the richness of the bear without adding too much weight to the dish as a whole.

The brown ale begins to simmer and it's time to add my spices. Lots of chili. Extra chili; I like it hot. Once they're all added, I stir it all together, making sure to coat each last piece of meat and square of softened veg in flavor.

If I had all the time in the world, and wasn't in the midst of wrapping up my college career, I would have stood over the stove and stirred and stirred and stirred. Unfortunately, meetings have forced me to resort to the crockpot...not a crack to these wonderfully handy tools, but it just a personal preference to authenticity. Now that all the spices and goods are toasted, coated, simmered and browned, I dump them into the

warmth of their future home for the next three hours. Here, they're met by three drained cans of beans (black and kidney) and diced tomatoes. Let's hope they all get along because in three hours, dinner is up.



If it's supposed to look like vomit and dog food then SUCCESS! The smells

are incredible; spicy, sweet, and full of that rich unexplainable scent of the bear. Just before serving, I toss in my secret ingredient (a handful of pure, dark chocolate flakes) to compliment the brown beer and rich bear. *Schlop* into the bowl and a scoop of sour cream: let the feasting begin.

III.

During the workday, Wendy Butler is a coordinator for the Japanese department at Middlebury College. In her spare time, she's a hunter, a gardener, a mother, a grandmother...oh, did I mention she's a champion of primitive biathlons? Along with her

father, husband and number of friends, Wendy straps wooden snow-shoes to her feet, runs, and shoots with a single shot muzzle loader....it's a hobby.

“There were guns in every corner of the house growing up,” Wendy says shrugging her strong shoulders. “We knew not to touch them. I never touched one until it was handed to me by my father.”

Wendy’s first kill was a buck. She shot it with a flintlock rifle. This traditional, single-shot, muzzle-loaded weapon is far from the modern semi loaded with all the bells and whistles that help take a deer down from 300+ yards while sitting in a tree.

“Most people who go out there,” she says, leaning forward in her chair and resting her folded hands on her tidy desk, “they’re hunting with sites and scopes and are shooting from three-four-hundred yards.” Her eyebrows rise slightly as her shoulders lift again.

“With a flint you’ve gotta be right up there with them. Maybe 50, 60 yards max.” Her eyes glaze over. She’s not seeing me sitting across from her, eyes wide and lower jaw no doubt hanging slightly ajar. No, she’s seeing, smelling, feeling the presence of that buck.

She laughs.

“There was this elk I shot in Ontario,” her neatly-cut blond hair shakes with her head, “I could hear it crashing around in the woods and was just thinking to myself, *that is not a squirrel*. Thirty yards in front of me this elk appears from out of the thick, his antlers”—she raises her hands, fingers splayed, wide to each side of her head, imitating a human-elk variety—“and I’ve got it in my site,” she pauses, drops her hands, and looks right at me.

My heart’s in my throat.

“I’ve got my flint of course,” she says.

Right, of course.

“Anyway, so I’m staring down my barrel and all I can hear is my husband’s heavy breathing behind me. He’s going *come on, shoot!* And I’m just like DUDE, shut up!” she chuckles again to herself and nods her head.

“He was just kicking himself for not being in front.”

“Isn’t venison really tough?” I asked Wendy as she offered me the neat package of her husband’s kill.

“Not the tenderloin,” she says, her lips smiling with what I can only imagine to be the reminiscence this most prized strip of the deer.

Along the deer’s back, running just below the loin and rump, this short, thin strip of flesh is the most tender and juicy strip of the animal. I now had responsibility for not ruining this prized slice that she so kindly handed right over to me, a random student she’s only met once before.

I asked my friend Chris, a local professional hunting and fishing guide, for guidance.

“If you cook that tenderloin on the grill or on a skillet like you would a beef steak—medium rare,” Chris licks his thin pink lips, his tongue brushing unconsciously against the grey stubble of a goatee that never leaves his lean face, “—it’s delicious. Just add a little butter to the pan, not too thick so you can cook it fast, just don’t over cook it...and it’s delicious.” He emphasizes the ‘d’, drawing out l, letting it roll over his tongue, his winter-blue eyes wide and sharp behind a pair of thin, rectangular glasses.

“You can take that to someone who’s never had venison, or who’s had it sawed off the bone and they’re like ‘ugh its gamey’ ...it’s not gamey at all, it’s just delicious.”

*Venison Tenderloin with Garlic-Herb Butter and
Roasted Turnips*

Venison Tenderloin

2 cuts tenderloin

2 tbsp salted butter

Garlic-Herb Butter

½ stick cold butter

2 garlic cloves, finely chopped

1 tbsp herbs of your choice (I only had dried oregano on hand, but it served well)

Roasted Turnips

2 large turnips, washed and cut lengthwise into strips

2 tsp olive oil

2 tsp balsamic vinegar

½ tsp ground cumin

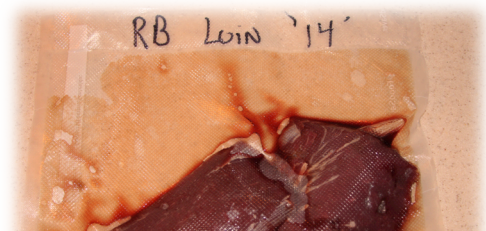
½ tsp ground cardamom

½ tsp chili powder (or cayenne pepper)

salt and pepper to taste

Preheat your oven to 450°. Toss turnips with olive oil, vinegar and spices before spreading them onto a sheet pan. Roast in the oven for 45 minutes, tossing them halfway through to ensure an even roast.

I'm going to preface this by saying I'm rarely responsible for the actual cooking of steak. Or tenderloin, or filet or any man-at-the-grill-with-a-beer meats for that matter. No, my job has traditionally been the preparation and execution of a flavorful marinade and appropriate side-sauce (the first sauce I ever



made was Hollandaise when I was 12...my mother tried to cover how pissed she was...her's always seemed to curdle).

That being said, the final dish of my preliminary adventures of wild game is venison tenderloin.

Both Chris and Wendy's voices are ringing in my ears: "just don't over cook it."

After borrowing an iron skillet from a friend who's off-campus kitchen is far better stocked than my dorm equivalent and getting the meat to room temperature, I'm feeling pretty ready. The parsnips are roasting, filling the stale, neon-lit linoleum-lined college kitchen with a warm, woody and spicy air.

I need to get the skillet to a high enough heat that the meat will cook quickly, evenly, but not burn. Let's say 8 out of 10? Alright, so now there's a slight smoke rising from the pan...I'm just going to assume that mean's it's hot enough and not that the pan is defunct. It's fascinating to watch butter as it hits a scorching pan. The thick, yellow grease erupts into bubbles, spreading a white yet somehow simultaneously translucent bubbling film across the black surface. Don't let it brown Helen.

I pick up one of the rectangular slices of my tenderloin. Like the bear, it's got a really nice dark, maroon color. I almost understand where Gaga got her inspiration for that dress...almost. A sharp *szzzz* sounds as flesh meets iron. Repeat with the second



tenderloin. I can already see the edges turning a light brown. Shit. Three minutes each side? Two? I don't want to over cook this.

After three minutes I decide to flip it. I wait another three minutes. Hmmm. The sides are still rather purple. Maybe I should sear each side? Okay. I poke it with my spatula, and it's pretty bouncy. Usually that means it's rather pink still, but how pink should it be? Chris said to take it off the pan and cover it for 10...maybe I'll try that. I do, and as I then slice into the meat. Yup, still fucking purple. Crap. I hope it's not going to ruin it if I put it back on the pan now. Don't really have a choice.

After putting the now brown, sweating slabs of meat back on the pan, there's definitely more smoke rising than before. I add more butter, just to keep the pan from burning the meat. I poke it again. Still bouncy, but getting a little more firm. Two more minutes, that's it.

After poking at each slab once more, I'm deciding it's ready. I remove the now smoky, dark chunks of meat from the pan onto a cutting board. There are little cracks in the meat; dark, seamy, flakey lines. They sure weren't lying about this being tender. It looks like it could melt apart right on the board. I cover it with tinfoil and now I have to be patient. I grab the garlic-herb butter I prepared earlier from the fridge. Parsnips are out of the oven. Shit. I forgot that this dorm oven runs hot. Oh well, slightly burnt bottoms never killed anyone, right? That burnt food=cancer thing had to have been another rumor, like Doritos or Coke? I'll take a bite just to make sure it's okay. Shit I LOVE turnips! Why don't I eat them more?! They're sweet but woody and the spices...mmm. And I have to say, that smoky burnt taste is only adding more to my tongue's delight right now.

Time to carve and dish out the venison. God I hope I didn't overcook it. The knife sinks easily into the soft meat, gliding through as I slice off the first perfectly round



medallion. The meat is red, but perfectly so. My chest opens with as I let out a thick gust of air.

My fingers are tingling with happiness. Success! I plate five slices per serving, scoop a dollop of the

herbed butter on top, and put the turnips mid-table for picking.

