

PLANET FOOD

November 2001

GAME

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My family have always been very enthusiastic eaters of game. Roast, casseroled or pan fried, birds like pheasant make a gourmet meal, and are very cheap to boot!

I remember friends recruiting me for 'beating' during a shooting weekend. The idea is that you use some implement to thrash around the hedge or field and raise the birds, so that the people with the guns – usually men – can take a shot. Although I am an enthusiastic walker, I was not always keen to do this because it quite often meant heading out early on a cold and frosty morning, when a warm cosy kitchen seemed more appealing.

Like every other country pursuit shooting has been affected by 'foot and mouth'. One concern is that the restrictions on export – particularly of deer – might result in a surplus of produce in the UK. And so efforts are being made to encourage more of us to eat more game – I won't have any problem with this.

This month I am going to talk mostly about pheasant and grouse, leaving pigeon, rabbit and venison to later columns.

SELLING GAME

"Pheasants are the ultimate convenience food"

Breast of pheasant is actually cheaper than a beefburger points out Jeffrey Olstead from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation. He says that there is no need to bother with plucking pheasants, just fillet the breast and cut the legs off. The fillet can be cooked in any number of ways, taking as little as five minutes, whilst the legs can be used to make a delicious stock.



Pheasant is low in cholesterol and high in protein. Because it is wild it will contain no growth promoters, no drug residues and little pesticide residues, particularly if it has survived on seed and berries.

Interestingly, game is more appreciated in other European countries, than in the UK. Over half of small game birds from this country are exported. And the biggest market here is to restaurants and pubs, rather than individual consumers.

If Europe do reduce the amount of smaller game they import from the UK – alongside restricting venison imports, due to foot and mouth – it is feared that other countries might fill the gap. In Eastern Europe they rear pheasants like intensively farmed chickens. Even if they are not such good quality as our wild birds, they are cheap.

A number of organisations have now banded together to try and promote British game to the British public. The idea is to help estates sell their surplus game and encourage local butchers to make it available. One problem that needs to be overcome is the current game dealer licensing laws. These were brought in 170 years ago to protect the landed gentry from poachers. In those days pheasants were worth poaching, but now there are so cheap that poaching is not really a problem.

Estates are only allowed to sell feathered game to licensed dealers, unless they have a license themselves. And the rules are even more stringent for anyone wishing to sell plucked prepared game. The legislation is currently bureaucratic and confused and there are some bizarre anomalies. For example, it is technically illegal for restaurants to serve game shot in this country more than 10 days

after the season has closed, even as pre-cooked, frozen pies. Not surprisingly this has not been tested in a court of law.

The result of this is that there is very little, if any, prepared game sold through farmers markets or farm shops. And many butchers won't sell game because they have not got the license. They are also restricted by having to keep feathered birds separate from other meat. A lot of the cost of a supermarket game bird comes from the hygiene in cutting and processing plants, although this does not account for the full increase from about £1 a bird from a shoot to £4-£5 in the supermarket.

SHOOTING AND CONSERVATION

“Eating pheasant is putting something back into the environment”

The British Trust for Ornithology and the Game Conservancy Trust have done a survey to see what sort of land management suits songbirds, such as yellow hammer, sky larks and tree sparrows, best. They have found the game cover is not only good for pheasants and partridge, but for these other birds too.

Land-owners who rear pheasant will generally be doing other things with their land as well. They help preserve hedgerows, moorland, ponds and rough habitat for the game birds to live in, as well as plant crops like kale, canary grass and millet for the birds to use as cover and for food. One problem this year is that the extra abundance of acorns and wild berries is making it difficult to keep the birds in any one area – they are spoilt for choice!

Shooting is apparently growing in popularity and economic importance, particularly at a time when farming and many traditional land-based activities are in melt-down. Luckily animal welfare activists have not yet made this a front-line concern – there is no mainstream organisation in this country opposed to game shooting.

But I have discovered that even some people in the shooting world are opposed to estates which over-stock their game and encourage people to consider the success of their day, solely in terms of the numbers of birds shot – known as the ‘bag’. Too many pheasant in one area can put pressure on wild animals and increase the likelihood of disease.

The type of shot – pellets – used is another conservation issue. In England, the law requires that wildfowl, geese and other water birds are shot with ‘non-toxic’ shot, to avoid it getting into watercourses and being eaten by the birds and being ground away in their gizzards. Lead shot is generally used however for other game birds because even if we swallow a pellet it will pass straight through our bodies and cause no harm.

The Countryside Agency have launched a campaign called ‘Eat the View’ (www.eat-the-view.org.uk). The idea is to encourage people to make the link between the goods they buy and eat and the countryside they cherish. What better way to do this than by eating game.

MOORLAND GROUSE

Interview with Sir Anthony Milbank, Barningham Park, Yorkshire

“The best and cheapest way of preserving moorland is to manage it for grouse shooting”

When my family bought Barningham Park in 1690, says Sir Anthony Milbank, they were merchant adventurers from Newcastle. What is now a grouse moor was probably a lot wilder in those days. But in 1850 there were dramatic improvements in guns and that started the real interest in shooting - in those days rough shooting of rabbits and black grouse amongst other things.

From then on the concept of managing a large area of moorland for grouse developed and became widespread in Northern England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Now Ireland and Wales have no grouse shooting and interestingly – as a result – very few grouse. Anthony argues that maintaining

grouse moorland for shooting is the most effective way of conserving, not only grouse, but quite a few other species as well.

A key part of maintaining the moorland is burning the heather. Some part of the moor is normally burnt every 25 years. This keeps the mosaic of different stages of heather growth, most of which is attractive to at least one type of bird or insect. If it is left unmanaged what you end up with is not good for sheep, grouse or many other birds. Barningham, for example, has a healthy population of wild grey partridges, a bird that is seriously threatened in many parts of the country.

To go back to the historical perspective. During the 2nd World War things started to deteriorate for heather moorland, chiefly through lack of interest and money. By the 1970s about 25% had been lost to farming, forestry and neglect. Then money started to come in.

Anthony observes that for the last 30 years or so people have been struggling to make estates pay for themselves. This has led, in many cases, to increasing intensification, either by the land-owner, or his tenant, and therefore pressure on wildlife. Now we have come full circle from the days when Anthony's wealthy ancestors bought the estate as a hobby – today people who are in the position to buy estates are much more likely to work in the IT or music business. And these people can afford to take a more relaxed view and farm less extensively.

Anthony says his grandfather would have turned in his grave to see the transformation from the gentleman's life of shooting with friends to the commercialism of selling a days grouse shooting for substantial fees. Visitors meet at the house and then drive grouse all day, interrupted only by a traditional lunch. Not all the grouse are taken by those who shoot them. Anthony sells them locally or by mail order and arranges this through a firm of licensed dealers.

Heather moorland is one of the most threatened and most protected landscapes in Europe. Anthony helped set up the Moorland Association, from which he has recently retired, after 15 years, as chairman. The aim is to preserve heather moorland in England and Wales. It seems that the future of these fragile areas are inextricably entwined with the future of grouse and wild grey partridge too. So if you can get grouse on the menu – go for it. You'll have to hurry this year because the grouse season finishes on December 10th.



SELLING GAME **Interview with Sandy Baxter of Yorkshire Game**

Sandy Baxter says that she started in the game business 18 years ago in support of her husband who already had a small business in 'fur and feather'. They were selling to a larger game processing factory, but 13 years ago decided to set up their own. He now looks after the operational side, whilst Sandy, as Managing Director, looks after the marketing and finance.

Yorkshire Game has a turnover of £1.4 million and has extended its offerings from seasonal game like grouse, partridge, teal, pheasant, woodcock and hare to other specialists meat and produce, such as guinea fowl, corn-fed chickens, quails and veal. Sandy points out that since the main season for most game in the UK starts with grouse on August 12th and is finished by 1st February, diversification is important for the company's cash flow.

When I spoke to Sandy, she had just returned from Henrietta Green's Food Lover's Fair in Covent Garden. She says there were lots of interesting stands with a wide variety of fare from sausages, smoked meat and turkeys to fish, cheese and freshly baked pies. She set up a stand with traditional game birds and was delighted with the response she got. Of key importance to Yorkshire Game was enlarging the mail order list of clients.

The company, do sell, to local butchers and Sandy thinks that all good local butchers should start selling game. She recognises, however, that seasonal produce is not such an attractive proposition for supermarkets. The main market, for Yorkshire Game, though is to caterers who love using game because it is easy to cook and good value.

Sandy also heads the National Game Dealers Association. In that capacity she has been working in partnership with the Countryside Alliance encouraging a resurgence of interest in game in the UK and maintaining an export market.

GAME CONTACTS

BARNINGHAM PARK **01833 621 202**
Sir Anthony Milbank, Barningham Park, Barningham, Richmond, North Yorkshire
Offers mail order grouse email: Milbank@teesdaleonline.co.uk

BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR SHOOTING AND CONSERVATION **01244 573 000**
The UK's national representative body for country shooting. They promote and safeguard the interests of all those who enjoy shooting sports. www.basc.org.uk

CAMPAIGN FOR SHOOTING
020 7840 9235 www.foresight-cfs.org.uk
The Campaign for Shooting has launched a major promotional initiative with the National game Dealers Association (NGDA) and the National Gamekeepers Organisation (NGO) to market UK game meat both here and on the continent.

COUNTRYSIDE AGENCY www.eat-the-view.org.uk

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF MEAT & FOOD TRADERS **01892 541 412**
Trade association representing high street butchers.

NATIONAL GAME DEALERS ASSOCIATION **01325 316 320**

NATIONAL GAMEKEEPERS ORGANISATION **01388 665 899**
www.nationalgamekeepers.org.uk

YORKSHIRE GAME **01325 316320**
Sells game primarily to catering trade but also through mail order. www.yorkshiregame.co.uk