

ARE YOU GAME?

ZEBRAS, ELK, DEER AND KANGAROOS CAN BE ADMIRED IN ZOOS ACROSS THE WORLD, BUT IN LINE WITH RECENT CUISINE TRENDS, YOU'RE JUST AS LIKELY TO FIND THEM ON A RESTAURANT MENU

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER



"If we take the gastropub movement as a benchmark to the popularity of game, then there are many people eating it," claims David Holliday, co-founder of David Oliver Fine Foods, a UK-based supplier of ready-made game and country soups and sauces. Skippy, Bambi, Thumper and Daffy Duck may object, but exotic meat is nothing new. Ever since the days of the Roman Empire, the tables of the upper crust have been laden with delicacies such as pheasant, quail and venison – meats that are now finding their way back into the lexicon of gastronomy.

A new generation of adventurous eaters are on their way. Emu, buffalo, hare and other game meats that were once difficult to source can now be found in supermarket fridges. Consumption is limited only by budget and taste. "Game is a traditional source of meat, and provenance is very important to people

these days," explains Holliday. "People are more aware that a lot of food has to make a huge journey across the globe to be sourced. Everyone, no matter where they are in the UK, will have a local supply of game."

This is certainly true for The Princess of Shoreditch, a gastropub in London's creative centre, which often features game on the menu. Head chef Shaun O'Rourke sources most of his game through Chart Farm, a family-run business that has been producing top quality venison for over thirty years.

"We have a great relationship with Sebastian Petersen from Chart Farms. He's been supplying us for about three years now," says O'Rourke. "He's got 400 acres down near Kent, within forty miles of London, and he rears about a thousand fallow and sika deer on there. He actually sources most of our game for us." O'Rourke has just returned from visiting

the farm and sings Sebastian's praises. "He's so passionate about it, and that's where you know you're getting quality. It's not like you're dealing with a massive supplier. He's only got a thousand deer on site, they only feed them on haylage [fodder made from alfalfa] and they shoot them from a hundred metres away from little huts," O'Rourke explains. This limits the stress on the animal, a factor that has an effect on the quality of the meat.

"Any stressed meat toughens up, and once the adrenal glands kick in from stress, that really taints the meat," explains Ken Lang from Yarra Valley Game Meats in Victoria, Australia. Like Chart Farm, Yarra Valley Game Meats specialise in deer. It was a steep learning curve for Lang, who moved to game meat farming from the building trade many years ago. "The bulk of venison is farmed and taken to the abattoirs, so there's a management factor

in that," he explains. "Once the animal is in transport they don't seem to stress as long as they're not in the truck too long. They are usually transported overnight or very early in the morning and processed first thing. If you can get the truck to the abattoir, unload the animals and have them processed within, say, thirty minutes, then they don't look around and start to get stressed." Without these protocols, there is a risk that the deer's senses will kick in, tensing the meat. "They've still got the flavour there," says O'Rourke, "But the meat is not going to be quite as tender as it should be."

For Lang, as with many game meat providers, there was a fast realisation that the market for venison was not big enough to make a living. Diversification was the key. "We realised there was not enough of a market to make a living just off venison, so we branched into doing other game meats," he says. "First was emu then kangaroo, now we market all game meats available. Some indigenous, most introduced, some wild harvested, as in culled or shot in the wild."

Somewhat uniquely, in many Australian states kangaroos are culled. An annual Federal Government survey determines the numbers, this year sitting at just under six million of the hopping herbivores. "The animals have to be culled whether they are utilised for animal consumption, human consumption or just left," justifies Lang. "The numbers explode very quickly and they can adapt themselves to anywhere. Because man has opened up so much pasture land, cleared so much forest and created so many waterholes, the numbers have compounded." Bear in mind that Australia is the only country that eats both the indigenous animals found on its coat of arms.

In Kenya the past decade has seen a ban on the culling of game meat, due to issues surrounding the illegal poaching of wild animals. This has been disappointing for Carnivore, a well-known meat-eaters' paradise. In South Africa, Carnivore offers a wide selection of game meat, ranging from zebra to wildebeest, warthog, and buffalo, but the Kenyan game offering is limited to farmed crocodile and ostrich.

"Though this ban has had no positive effect at all in controlling the menace [of illegal poaching], our consistent lobbying for an reinstatement of rightful culling – and more so by private ranch owners – has fallen on deaf ears," laments kitchen operations director, Joseph Chacheru.



FROM LEFT: Pheasant is finding its way back on to the menu; a shank of venison brings medieval banquets to mind.

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The kangaroo cull is also not without controversy, but it can be argued that it's just a form of organic farming. After all, you can't farm kangaroos in the traditional sense – they need an extremely wide area to move around in and anything that's farmed has to be taken on a truck to an abattoir. "Can you imagine a truckload of kangaroos going to the abattoir? And then trying to run them up the race [corrals which funnel livestock into an abattoir], one after the other?" asks Lang. "Come on, boys, keep hopping," he laughs. "It couldn't be done."

Wild rabbits, hare and game birds also tend to be wild harvested, while deer, emu and

crocodile amongst others, are farmed. "They farm crocodiles for the skins, not the meat. The meat is just a by-product," says Lang. Possum, coming from Tasmania, is the only Australian game that is trapped and then processed in an abattoir.

Lang has seen an increase in demand for game for personal use, as well as in the restaurant trade. "Things we sell for personal use include duck products, quail, and venison. Kangaroo is always very popular because people have realised that even though it doesn't have the status, it's organic. It's a free-range harvested animal," he says. He also notes that possum is generating interest. ➔



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Oliver Shute (left) and David Holliday (right) of David Oliver Fine Foods; perfectly prepared venison at The Princess of Shoreditch; The Princess of Shoreditch often features game meat on the menu.



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Holliday puts part of the rise in popularity of game and its by-products down to the power of television. “Every time a celebrity chef is on the TV they are talking about the wonderful local bounty that is UK game,” he declares.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for game meat is the health benefits. The British consume an estimated average of 80 kilograms each of meat annually, behind the Australians at 120 kilograms and the Americans working their way towards 125 kilograms a year – all three ranking near the top in the league of carnivores. The case for cutting meat consumption has long been a compelling one from a health perspective, but it has never been a popular idea. This is where game meat offers an advantage.

“That’s the good thing about game – it’s really lean,” says O’Rourke. “Most of it has a really low fat content, and because it’s seasonal you know that it’s coming to your plate fresh. It’s something that hasn’t been sat around for a while, apart from the hanging or ageing process. The red meats are close to beef in flavour; they’re just a little more intense and a lot leaner.”

It also makes menus a lot more interesting, something not lost on head chefs. “And it’s really versatile to work with,” enthuses O’Rourke. “In the season that it’s in, it matches up with a lot of mushrooms, and different berries, and that’s why a lot of that stuff is classically

paired together. It has really earthy flavours.” It’s this element that entices O’Rourke towards dishes such as venison and chocolate stew. “I wouldn’t put beef and chocolate together in a pie. I would put pheasant and chocolate, or venison and chocolate together,” he says. “The flavours just complement each other. It’s kind of earthy and bitter. I don’t think beef has that. It’s stuff like that you can do with game that’s just amazing.”

O’Rourke’s graphic description of how to prepare a whole-roasted haunch of venison is mouth-watering. “The flavour, the texture, it’s just melt in the mouth. When it’s cooked properly it’s just beautiful,” he exclaims convincingly. “The most flavoursome for me is the haunch because you’ve got a little bit of fat running between three muscle groups and sika deer is probably the best because it’s slightly more fatty, in terms of venison, than anything else. It’s sealed off, and then we cook it overnight on 50C or 55C depending on the meat, going perfect medium-rare. Pink all the way through.”

O’Rourke places a dish of perfectly prepared venison on the table, the meat pleasingly pink, as it hugs the contours of a mound of creamy mashed potato, drizzled with a deep red jus. As the first bite melts in my mouth I become a game meat convert. From filet of gazelle to bison burgers, ostrich goulash to possum paté, bring it on. 🍴

“How do people prepare possum?” I ask. “The same as a cat,” replies Lang without hesitation. I pause in my tracks. “I’ve never prepared cat,” I counter cautiously as Lang bursts into raucous laughter. Neither has he. “When its skun, possum looks like a rabbit with a long tail,” he describes. “It’s about the same structure. It’s very lean with no fat on it. It’s a pink meat, about the colour of a rabbit.”

O’Rourke lists partridge, pheasant, grouse, and wild rabbit as growing in popularity in the UK. “A few years ago the trends of food changed a lot and we also started using stuff like offal,” he says. “It’s really become fashionable. We do stuff with venison hearts, things like that. It’s all full of flavour. It’s been a massive trend over the last few years. Offal is totally back in.”