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TERRANCE BRENNAN'S GOT GAME • SUPERMARKET SAUVIGNON?

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## HUNTER-GATHERER

# HE'S GOT GAME

*Terrance Brennan serves the wildest meat the law allows.*

BY CHRISTIAN DEBENEDETTI



On a gusty wet morning in January, chef Terrance Brennan stood in a sodden field with mud streaming down his boots and a loaded gun in his hands. This was Scotland's Earn Valley, in Perthshire, not far from the town of Auchterarder, and the day—two winters back—wasn't starting well.

The A7 Quattro had gotten mired in the mud; everyone had drained more than a few whiskies the night before; the driving wind and rain had soaked us to the bone. The plan—for Brennan; Andrew Hamilton, a Scottish-born, East Coast-based game supplier; and me—was for a traditional “rough shoot,” meaning, loosely, this: a stomp in the fields, dogs, plenty of ammo and, with a bit of luck, some quarry—pheasants, duck, maybe a woodcock or two.

We'd arrived for the last week of shooting season in Scotland, where all of the game birds Brennan has served at Picholine for the last 12 autumns are shot in the wild on sprawling estates, but so far, the fields were silent. Then Mark Wilson, a local farmer's blue eyed, red-haired son showing us around, led us into a boggy field.

Suddenly Clyde and Rosie—Wilson's dogs, a spry cocker spaniel and an ancient black lab—flushed a noisy whorl of teal ducks from a pond into the sky. Terrance raised his shotgun and blasted, unloading both barrels. They were his first-ever shots at birds, and, in that instant, the day improved considerably: two ducks froze in mid-air, shot through, and dropped like stones.





Photographs: Opposite page and this page top, Christian DeBenedetti; this page bottom, Andrew Hamilton

Whiskey, Tartan and Woodcock: Picholine's chef flew to Scotland to bag some not-so-big game.

“Oh, yeah!” Brennan shouted, turning around and beaming wide-eyed with what seemed like beginner's luck. Only it wasn't. For the rest of the morning, as we traipsed through hedgerows and heather-lined gullies, Brennan—a father of three boys who has earned multiple nominations from the James Beard Foundation as Best New York Chef, two Michelin stars and a three-star rave from the *Times* in 2007, thanks in large part to his menu of wild game—seemed a natural. He'd come to Scotland for the first time to learn how the flavorful fowl he serves makes it to his kitchen—and now he was bagging it, bird by bird.

It was a rare break from his hectic schedule running five restaurants—Manhattan's Picholine, Bar Artisanal and Artisanal Fromagerie Bistro & Wine Bar, plus Artisanal Brasserie & Winebar and the Artisanal Table Pizzeria Enoteca (both in Bellevue, Washington). We'd have a rough shoot on the first day, and a more formal experience the next.

“I was like, ‘Oh, God, this is going to suck,’” Brennan recalled. “But then we came to that pond, and it was like, I *love* this! We shot all morning in the wind.”

Windy it was—and wild, in the truest sense. With very few exceptions, meat sold in the United States as “wild game” really isn't: thanks to laws created to prevent the reckless extinction of indigenous species, it's actually been farm-raised and killed young (for tenderness, vendors say). Laws vary by country, but in Scotland wild game birds can be shot in their natural habitat, and what's not allotted to the individual shooter (a few birds per person) is processed for restaurants there and abroad. (When it comes to game, rules are confusing. Basically, it's illegal in the United States to buy or sell wild game unless it comes from a USDA-approved farm. The exception is Texas, which allows the capture of naturally wild boars in traps; the meat is sold in very limited quantities.)

Scotland's game birds—the reason we'd come—are prized for sheer intensity of flavor. The meat seems to reflect the hardiness of the place, with lean, jowl-tingling flavors that can make farm-raised “wild” game taste like Chicken McNuggets. The Scottish game-bird season runs from mid-August to the first of February. Pheasants, introduced from China in the 19th century, are a prime target, and though the populations are necessarily somewhat managed—gamekeepers take pains to minimize predators, for example—the tightly run Scottish system is the envy of sporting nations. And increasingly, the birds taken from that system are making their way to New York tables.

Time was, the wildest game one encountered in New York was the occasional raccoon in an alley, never mind pheasant or partridge on high-end menus. But starting in the mid-1980s, adventurous importers like Ariane Daguin of D'Artagnan and Andrew Hamilton of Scottish Wild Harvest began introducing diners and home chefs to these elusive creatures prized abroad for flavor and character. Today they bring in a wide variety of wild game (of Scottish and other origins, including domestic) for chefs at New York restaurants (and online home consumers, too). Brennan is well known for his annual, seasonal game tasting menu at Picholine, and both Tom Colicchio's Craft and Daniel Boulud's armada of eateries offer the meats. Game on, as they say.

Henry's End, in Brooklyn Heights, has created a game-based menu from October until early March for the past 20 years, offering seven or eight game dishes a night including venison, wild boar, even reindeer. Though the beasts are farm-raised, owner Mark Lahm says the appeal lies in game's natural healthfulness.

"We knew it was good from the start," he said (adding that his game birds aren't from Scotland—"we find it almost a bit *too* gamy"—but from domestic farm operations). He added that farm-raised game is also conveniently free of buckshot, a pardonable nuisance Brennan's guests occasionally endure (good naturedly, Brennan reports). "We started off small with a week before Christmas and New Year's; now we do it for almost half the year," Lahm said. Rattlesnake, anyone?

Back in Scotland, our shells spent, it was time to call it day, so Terrance, Andrew and I warmed up over a few whiskies at a country pub. We would find out the next day exactly why estate bird shooting in Scotland is so sought after—but first, there was some traditional merrymaking to do. We convened at Prestonfield House, a 17th-century castle in Edinburgh, for a rousing black-tie-or-kilt-required "Burns Supper," a celebration of poet Robert Burns replete with bawdy toasts and haggis. Brennan donned a kilt (another first), and our table's conversation centered on sustainable haute cuisine, at least when the likes of Annabel Goldie, a witty Member of Scottish Parliament, didn't have the floor. With plenty more single malt, it was the perfect prologue for the next day's main event.

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Navigating rain-flooded byways early the next morning, we soon arrived at Birkhill Castle, home of the Earl and Countess of Dundee, outside St. Andrews, since 1780. No skeet range, this: Shooters (never "hunters"), clad in green oilcloth jackets, wool caps and britches called "plus-fours," come to estates like this one every year for "driven birds," in which teams of dogs (English springer spaniels, mostly) and locals known as "beaters" fan through the forest, flushing pheasants over brakes of beech and pine toward the shooters at the purposefully difficult height of 100 feet or more. The rest is skill.

As we joined our gamekeeper George Elliott and a group of tweedy Dutch clients, it was impossible to ignore that participation in a traditional drive requires more than just time and money—the waiting list is over a year and a half and the cost thousands per person per day, depending on the haul of birds. Moreover it requires a certain demeanor that wearing a long oilcloth coat and carrying a Russian-made double-barrel over-and-under Baikal 12-gauge seems to inspire. As our Land Rovers caravanned from field to field, I thumbed through a dog-eared copy of a book I'd spotted in the old stone mill where we'd gathered for lunch. It was *Churchill's Game Shooting*, fifth edition, by Macdonald Hastings, and in between its many bon mots about the pleasures and decorum of shooting was the explanation for exactly what we'd been feeling.

Traditional bird shooting combines the visceral thrill of seeing a beautiful animal blaze through the sky and a trigger blast with vague tides of hangman's guilt. It's hard not to feel a tinge of remorse when the feathers fly and what was once a soaring bird become a lifeless hunk of meat.

That is, until you remember that every bird you shoot on a Scottish game estate ends up on a plate near its home or abroad (among Terrance's next game shipment were many of the birds taken on our drives). Still, a shooting expedition can be tough going. While Terrance racked up still more birds, I'd missed all weekend, save for a single streaking mallard. The gloom was getting to me, despite the shots of Klemminger (a German-made Jaegermeister-like spirit) and brotherly cajoling. Then I lightened up. How could I not? The forests echoed with baying dogs, the shooters handled the birds they killed with care—we couldn't leave a spot until every single fallen bird was accounted for—and the misty Tay River cast a spell. "A man who cannot hit a golf ball, or pot a black to save his life, can shoot driven game with fair precision," Hastings encouraged.

Or not. "The reason that all of us do miss—much too often—is entirely the consequence of bad style," Hastings explained. "If you wish to improve your shooting, the first necessity is to recognize your own weaknesses." I read the passage to Terrance, who was wearing a green fly-fishing jacket, now muddy. I'd donned a rumpled corduroy blazer. The day complete, we raised cans of beer and laughed, toasting the Dutchmen, who passed up the opportunity to acknowledge who had taken the most birds—that wasn't the point. Neither of us could remotely compete with the Dutchmen on marksmanship, or style, but it didn't matter. Not much, anyway.

"I'm definitely coming back next year," Terrance said. "And next time, I'm definitely bringing the right clothes." 🍷

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