



FROM FIELD *to* FEAST — *Hunting and cooking wild game*

By Moira M. Tidball; photos by author, unless otherwise noted

“I’m just the cook.”

That was my answer for years when someone would inevitably ask me if I hunted. You see, I was always cooking some type of game that my avid sportsman husband Keith would bring home to my kitchen. In the fall and early winter he’d arrive with a bounty of ducks and geese. I would marvel at the feather patterns as I parsed them into cooking pieces for items such as duck à l’orange or smoked goose breast. A tasty ruffed grouse might come next, from the Finger Lakes National Forest in Hector, with the help of our German shorthaired, polka-dotted dog. Pickerel and perch would be coaxed from the ice in front of our home at the north end of Cayuga Lake—perfect for a winter meal of fish chowder.

One Saturday in February, a pile of skinned (thankfully) squirrels arrived after a local squirrel derby. Really? Squirrel? A friend saw the doubtful look on my face and said, “It’s like chicken, only nuttier.” Amazingly, this turned out to be true,

and braised squirrel in apple cider is now one of my favorite dishes and served annually as part of our Thanksgiving feast. Spring brought wild turkey and trout. Summer would produce the occasional bass or panfish, and autumn was mostly about white-tailed deer.

I love to cook and appreciate eating locally and seasonally, with the freshest ingredients possible. Preparing and creating gourmet meals from my husband’s wild game and fish quarry connected me to the seasons, the animal, and the place it was from. But, perhaps not fully, for I was still *just the cook*.

I work for Cornell Cooperative Extension in Seneca County as a nutrition educator, which includes teaching people how to prepare nutritious, healthy foods, including venison. Anecdotal, I would hear people who tried a food sample of venison meatballs say they didn’t like it because it was too gamey. But when presented with a gourmet rendition of venison, they would say “...I like this!”



The author and her husband Keith are both outdoor enthusiasts

With encouragement from Keith, I started a blog-turned-website that offers recipes and tips on cooking wild game and fish: <http://wildharvesttable.com>. For each recipe, I created a nutrition label using a standard nutrition software package. I began to realize that a lot of wild game species were missing from the software which is based on the USDA's National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference. I thought, "How could every fad-driven new flavor of this or that packaged food be in the nutrition software, but items such as brook trout, ruffed grouse or Canada goose were not?" As a nutritionist who liked to cook wild game, this bothered me, so I decided to do something about it.

I decided that brook trout, our state fish, was a good starting place. Ever since I tasted a brook trout cooked over a wilderness campfire—in a foil pouch, prepared simply with butter, salt and pepper—I was hooked on this culinary prize. The bonus of brook trout fishing was traveling to pristine waters in the Adirondacks to find them.

We applied for, and got, a USDA Hatch grant to collect brook trout to be nutritionally analyzed and added to the National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference. That spring was agony for Keith and me as most of the fish we caught had to go to the laboratory instead of our plates! Catching brook trout the size of dinner (or a research protocol) is not an easy thing to do.

While I enjoyed pursuing my own dinner, I still wasn't sure if I could take the next step to hunting deer or small game. I'm not sure if it was resistance to actually killing the animal myself (though in my mind it shouldn't be different than a brook trout), or anxiety about the use of a firearm. I didn't grow up around guns, and they intimidated the heck out of me.



Moira's Slow Cooker Duck a L'Orange

This duck recipe is perfect for an easy dish to make for a delicious dinner on a tight schedule. Simply put all the ingredients in the slow cooker in the morning, and by the time you get back home for dinner, you'll have a tasty meal waiting for you.

Ingredients

4-6 duck breast halves, skin removed
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon pepper
2 small oranges, peeled, sectioned
1 medium apple, peeled and cut into thick slices
1 medium onion, cut into thick slices
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 cup orange juice
1-2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley (1 teaspoon if dried)

Directions

Sprinkle duck with salt and pepper. Layer duck, oranges, apple, onion and garlic in a 3.5- to 6-quart slow cooker. Sprinkle a bit of sugar (or honey) and parsley on top of the duck. Pour orange juice over top.

Cover and cook on low heat setting about 6-8 hours or until duck is tender.

Remove duck from slow cooker. Discard fruit and onion mixture, since it may be bitter.

Slice thin to serve and drizzle an orange/Asian flavored sauce (available in many grocery stores) or some heated marmalade across the duck slices. For an appetizer, cut duck into bite-sized chunks, skewer a piece of duck with a slice of clementine orange or mandarin orange on a toothpick and drizzle with orange sauce. As an entrée, the duck breast can be served on a bed of rice pilaf with a side vegetable or served on a bed of greens as a salad course.

For one of Moira's delicious venison recipes, check out our website at www.TheConservationist.org.



Our daughters were beginning shooting lessons and getting involved in 4H Shooting Sports. They were quite competent around firearms, so I decided to join them in these lessons. Making a bad shot was a concern I had about deer hunting, but I was encouraged at the shooting range when I consistently hit the mark.

I continued to cook and create venison dishes for the website and educational events. And I was continuously asked if I hunted. It was becoming apparent to me that I needed to close this circle. Many months later, I found myself on a perch in a two-person deer stand, watching the forest wake up. It was a beautiful crisp November morning and my senses were heightened because I was finally hunting. With Keith (who is a licensed guide) by my side, I patiently watched a doe, waiting for that perfect shot. Remembering my firearm training, I took a breath, and pulled the trigger. The deer ran! I was devastated, but Keith said,

“Relax, it was a good shot and it is likely only a few yards away in the brush. But we have to wait at least fifteen minutes before we get down and check.” Ugh. My heart was pounding with adrenaline and mixed emotions, mostly worry that I had made a bad shot.

After we climbed down from the tree stand, we found the doe just a few yards off the trail. It had been a clean heart shot. I must admit, I cried, but it was that mixed, emotional cry that came from some overwhelming combination of relief, joy and sadness. I thanked the deer and knew that it would be appreciated along every step to the dinner table.

Books such as Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and Tovar Cerulli’s *The Mindful Carnivore: A Vegetarian’s Hunt for Sustenance* indicate that there is an interest in connecting with our meat sources as part of the local food movement, including acquiring meat through hunting. As part of our Cornell research, in addition to collecting nutritional data for brook trout and two other species, we investigated so-called “locavores,” people who strive to eat mainly locally produced foods. We explored their inclinations to acquire, prepare and consume wild game and fish, and the role of those decisions in conservation and ecological systems.

Results of a survey we sent to locavores in the Finger Lakes region in May 2014, indicated substantial interest

in topics related to consumption of wild game meat. Specifically, 58.7% of participants were somewhat or very interested in learning more about preparing wild game meat, and 58.9% of participants were somewhat or very interested in learning more about the conservation benefits of eating wild game. In topics related to wild-caught fish consumption, 69.1% of respondents were somewhat or very interested in learning more about preparing wild-caught fish, and 74.0% of respondents were somewhat or very interested in learning more about the conservation benefits of eating wild-caught fish. With these results, programming can be tailored to meet consumers’ educational desires through Extension workshops and the Wild Harvest Table website.

I have found harvesting and cooking wild game tremendously satisfying. Wild game is very nutritious, and you can’t get any fresher ingredients! Ultimately, hunting wild game, fishing, and transforming this quarry into delicious meals provides a unique opportunity to connect with the reality of eating meat, conservation practices, and the culinary bounty in New York State.

Cornell Cooperative Extension Nutrition Educator **Maira M. Tidball** is a culinary aficionado who enjoys cooking all kinds of wild game.



Do You Want to Become a Locavore?

If you are interested in obtaining your own food through hunting or fishing, check DEC’s website (www.dec.ny.gov); it contains information on hunting and fishing, including rules, regulations and licensing requirements. You may also want to find a mentor. Mentors are invaluable resources; they can be a friend or family member, or someone you met through a local sportsmen’s club or shooting range. Hiring a licensed guide is another option as well.

Women can learn about hunting and outdoor recreation skills through DEC’s Becoming an Outdoors–Woman workshops. Visit <http://on.ny.gov/1uOFK2r> for more information.

For culinary tips, websites such as the Wild Harvest Table (<http://wildharvesttable.com>) offer insights into cooking and preparation techniques for game. Wild game meat is generally leaner than farm-raised meat and needs to be cooked accordingly, by adjusting cooking times, and by employing various tenderizing techniques like braising and marinades.