



The game of life

Seamus Commons, award-winning chef at **La Fougère** restaurant in **Knockranny House** Hotel, Westport, Co Mayo, has some ideas on how to make the most of the tasty game available this season

For me, autumn food showcases nature at its best, and one of the best things nature has to offer is game.

The unique taste and smell of roasted game reminds me of being a child, when my dad used to head out with the shotgun on a Sunday and feed us for most of the following week with all the various animals he'd landed.

I now enjoy doing the same, and my kids have become great fans of game themselves, teal and venison especially.

In terms of the cuts of the meat, I find venison really versatile – the haunch can be braised, smoked, cured, stir-fried or just served up as a delicious steak, and it's the same for the loin. Even the neck is great for braising, while at **La Fougère** we will also use the tongue. If you've shot the animal yourself, the liver fried up with some onions is just delicious.

Here are three recipes which make use of venison and rabbit, two of which are relatively uncomplicated, and the third designed for when you have a little bit more time at your disposal.

Wild Irish venison and root vegetable hot pot

Ingredients

150g parsnip, peeled and

cubed
150g carrot, peeled and cubed
150g turnip, peeled and cubed
150g celeriac, peeled and cubed
Four small banana shallots, peeled
One clove garlic, finely chopped
A bay leaf
A sprig of thyme
Four juniper berries
Three large potatoes, peeled and thinly-sliced
500ml game stock
600g topside venison, cubed
100g smoked bacon, diced

Method

1. Season the venison with salt and pepper and seal it in a very hot pan with the juniper, thyme and bay leaf. Place in a buttered earthenware dish.
2. In a medium to hot pan, sweat off the bacon. When crispy, add the garlic, shallots and cubed vegetables. Sweat for a few minutes, then place in the earthenware dish on top of the venison. Pour over the game stock.
3. Place the sliced potato on top and butter the top layer well. Cover with a lid and place in a pre-heated oven at 180C for 25 minutes. Remove the lid and cook for a further 25 minutes or until the potatoes are golden brown. Remove from the oven and serve.

Loin of rabbit and Kelly's black pudding wrapped in Parma ham, served with a prune compote

Ingredients

Four loins of rabbit
400g Kelly's black pudding
Eight strips of parma ham

For the compote

500g chopped prunes
Zest of half a lemon
Zest of half an orange
One vanilla pod, split in two
One cinnamon stick
One star anise clove
One Earl Grey teabag
125g sugar
70ml water

Method

1. To make the compote, place the prunes in a pot with the lemon and orange zest, vanilla, cinnamon, star anise, Earl Grey teabag, sugar and water. Bring to the boil and simmer for ten minutes.
2. Remove the prunes from the liquid and purée slightly with a blender. The compote will keep in the fridge in an airtight container for two weeks, so can be prepared ahead of time.
3. To make the rest of the dish, first break down the black pudding. Place two slices of Parma ham on clingfilm, spread the black pudding across the ham and place the loin of rabbit in the centre. Roll this into a sausage shape and wrap tightly in clingfilm, tying at both ends.
4. Place in boiling water and simmer for three minutes, then plunge into iced water to stop the cooking process.

Remove the clingfilm and seal the loin in a hot pan until golden brown. Finish cooking in a pre-heated oven at 180C for five minutes.

Wild loin of Irish venison served with pear and vanilla purée, truffled cabbage, smoked bacon, potato and chestnut fondant, and chocolate and port syrup

Ingredients

120g of loin venison per person
One tbsp oil
One sprig of rosemary
Two juniper berries, cracked
Two tbsps gin

For the pear and vanilla purée

Two pears, peeled, cored and chopped
One vanilla pod, split lengthways and seeds removed

For the truffled cabbage

Half a head of cabbage, washed and finely chopped
One shallot, chopped
Four outer leaves from the cabbage, pre-blanching
20g smoked bacon
One tsp truffle oil

For the potato, smoked bacon and chestnut fondant

Two large baking potatoes, peeled
50g chestnuts, peeled
One banana shallot
40g smoked bacon, diced
One sprig of thyme

SALDRINA

10g butter
20ml cream
250g duck fat

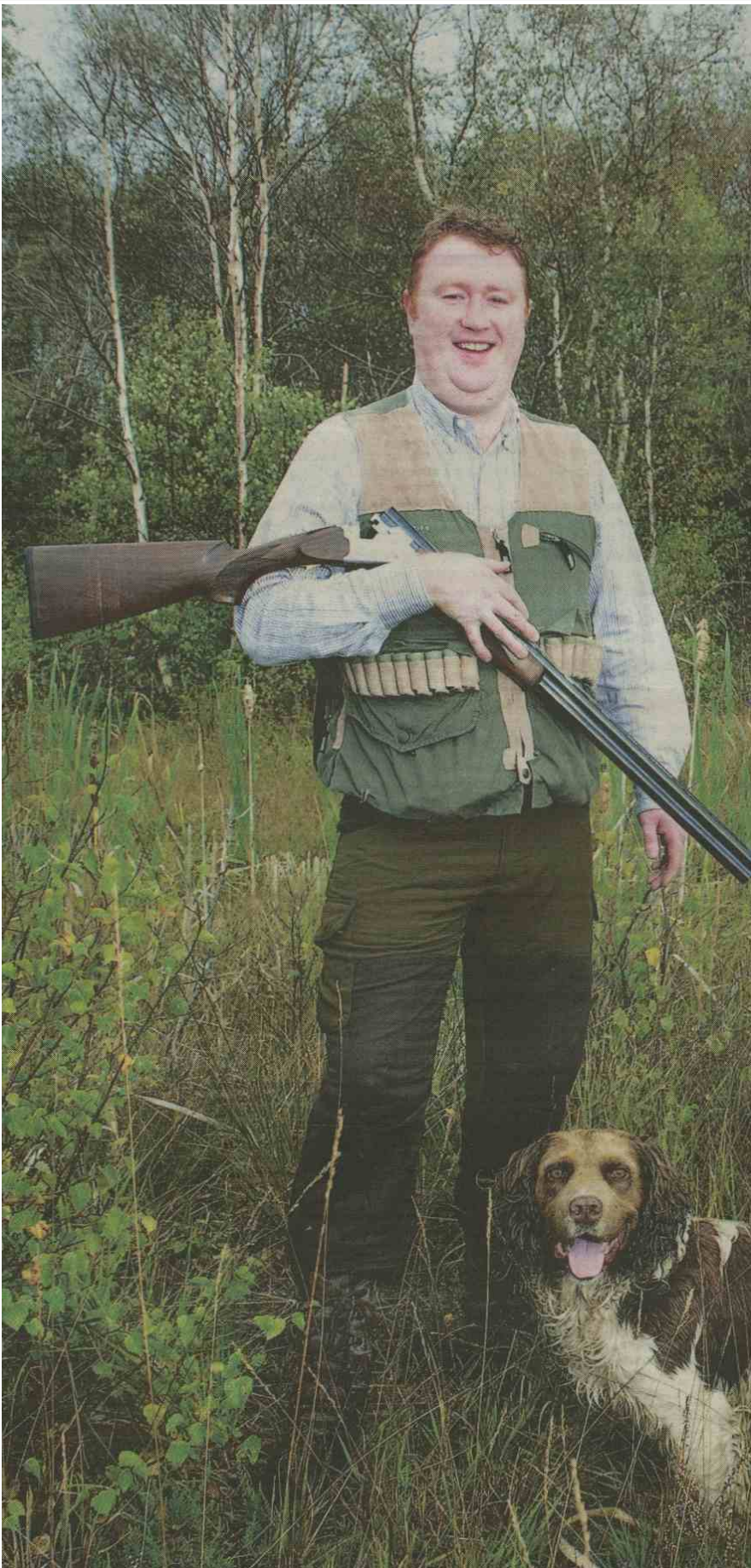
For the chocolate and port syrup

100ml port
Zest of a quarter of an orange
One sprig of thyme
One bay leaf
50ml game stock
100g dark chocolate, 80 per cent cocoa solids
One tsp brown sugar
One tsp orange balsamic vinegar

Method

1. Place the venison, cracked juniper berries and a sprig of rosemary in a bag and leave overnight in the fridge. Remove from the bag and season.
2. Seal off the venison in a hot pan until golden brown, then add the gin and flambé. Place in a pre-heated oven for eight minutes (this will cook the venison medium). Remove from the oven and cover with tinfoil, and allow to rest for three minutes.
3. To make the compote, place the pears, vanilla seeds and pod in a pot and cover with a lid. Cook slowly on a low heat until soft. Remove the vanilla pod, then place the mixture in a blender and blitz until smooth. Set aside and keep warm.
4. To make the cabbage, melt the butter in a warm pot until it is lightly foaming. Add the shallots and thyme, then sweat until the shallots are soft, but have no colour.
5. Add the cabbage and cook until tender, then season with salt and add the truffle oil. Form into a ball shape and wrap in the outer leaves. Wrap the ball in clingfilm and set aside.
6. To heat the cabbage balls up, place them in boiling water for three minutes. Remove the clingfilm and place on the plate.
7. To make the fondant, sweat off the thyme, smoked bacon and shallot in butter, again without letting them get colour. Add the chestnuts and the cream, then bring to a simmer. Purée the mixture in a food processor until smooth, place in a disposable piping bag and set aside.
8. Cut the potato into rings using a two-inch diameter scone cutter. Remove the centre of the fondant with a melon baller, then seal it on all sides until golden in a hot pan.
9. Confit the potato in the duck fat with some thyme, garlic and salt. When they are three-quarters cooked, remove them from the fat. Pipe the chestnut filling into the hole in the centre, and finish cooking them in the oven.
10. For the sauce, place the port, orange zest, thyme and bayleaf in a pot and reduce until a thick glaze. Add the game stock and sugar, reduce by one third and add the balsamic vinegar.
11. To assemble the dish, place the cabbage ball and the potato fondant on a warm plate. Run a line of the purée to one side, then carve the venison and place on the purée. Pour the jus over the meat to serve.

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Left: Seamus Commons goes shooting near his home in Co Mayo
MICHAEL MCLAUGHLIN