

About 2000 words

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RESPECT

"Our harvest being gotten in, our  
Governour sent foure men on fowling,  
that so we might after a more speciall  
manner rejoyce together, after we had  
gathered the fruit of our labours...."

--Edward Winslow letter, Dec. 11,  
1621, about the first Thanksgiving

My wife sent me fowling in the same season, but 363 years  
later. Non-hunters would have to celebrate with tame turkey --  
full of growth-hormones and empty of flavor -- but we hoped to do  
better. It was the second Saturday before Thanksgiving, and my  
mission was to bring home a cock pheasant. It would age on our



back porch, just as birds were shown in old still-life paintings. The feathers would glow like autumn leaves. On the holiday, twelve days later, we would dry-pluck the bird, taking care not to tear the skin. I would then discard the crop, intestine, and lungs. Almost everything else would be saved. The heart, liver, gizzard, feet, and neck would be used in making the sauce. We would have the best dinner in our nation's capital -- full of the emotions and flavors of the field.

My old pointer hit scent along a weedy Maryland hedgerow. If we had arrived ten minutes earlier, we might have had a shot. Instead, we pushed the pheasant toward two hunters coming in from the opposite end. We heard six quick shots, which would usually mean a miss but in this case did not. My dog brought me the warm remains. The hunters who got the bird had "breasted it out" on the spot -- ripped open the skin and pulled off two warm chunks of flesh. They had then thrown out the rest, which included half of the meat, most of the flavor, and all of the beauty. It seemed a safe bet that the torn fragments they took home would not appear on the Thanksgiving table.

When hunters show disrespect for the hunted, something fundamental has been lost. Killing one's prey and honoring it have been inseparable actions since men became men. We know this because ancient paintings on the walls of caves are real art, which shows that the artists were real humans. Most of the paintings are of species eaten by the hunters. The connection has reached down through the millennia, and in some cultures there



are still rituals for fallen game. People everywhere fuss over game cookery, too. When I lived in Europe, where wild game could legally be sold, a pheasant cost several times more than a chicken, and people who went to extra expense always showed respect, at least for their investment.

In America too, our ancestors would not tolerate waste. A friend who is in his seventies says that his mother would have paddled him if he'd skinned a bird. The reward for thrift was flavor, and that's still the secret of great cooking around the world. Whether you pronounce the dishes in French, Italian, or English, they squeeze out all the flavor. The taste is elegant but there's no squeamishness in the preparation. And there are no secrets because all of this has been going on since long before 1621.

The old skills have, however, been withering since Americans moved to town and began buying chicken parts wrapped in plastic. When my wife and I were learning how to cook game birds, we were advised to braise those tough pheasants or bake them in pies. We read the recipes of famous lodges and hunters who were too busy to dress game in the old ways. A book titled Easy Game Cooking opined that "all this talk about letting game hang, is nothing but medieval twaddle. The sooner a bird is drawn, plucked, and frozen or cooked, the better it will be."

On the table as in the field, however, we found pheasants deceptive. When cooked fresh, they were the toughest and most tasteless of upland game. When aged, plucked, and roasted, a



single pheasant made the best of holiday dinners -- big enough to serve our family of three, mellow and robust enough to go with old red wine.

In birds as in wine, the biggest flavors take longest to develop. I don't know why pheasants need more aging than other game birds, but they do. Even young cocks are best when hung for a week. For special dinners, my wife and I prefer the biggest, oldest, fattest birds -- the ones over three pounds with wicked spurs -- and they are tough till they have hung two weeks. We have often let them go for three weeks rather than freeze them, because they are never quite as good after a stay in the freezer. Bear in mind, though, that no game could be hung this long under poor conditions. We live in Montana now, and by November our garage stays between 30 and 40 degrees.

If the weather is warm, age the bird in a refrigerator, preferably on wire shelves for good air circulation. Don't use a plastic bag. Fortunately, the weather is usually cool enough, by pheasant season, to allow aging on an insect-free porch or in a garage. Hang a bird by one foot -- not by both feet and not by the head. Keep an eye on it. Sniff it. If it has been chewed by your dog, don't push your luck. And if your pheasants are full of shot, promise yourself to switch to an improved-cylinder choke tube, for a single-barrel gun; cylinder and modified for a double.

Normally, no field dressing is needed: just get the pheasant out of your game bag and into a place where it can cool off



quickly. If the day is unseasonably hot, insert a forked stick in the vent, twist, and pull out the whole intestine. Some knives come with special hooks for the job. The idea is to remove the part of the innards that is most prone to spoilage, but without tearing the skin. If you open the body cavity in the normal way, you will find it difficult to pluck the bird later.

The rest of the process of dressing is summarized in the first paragraph above. Dry-plucking tries your patience but produces better flavor than plucking wet. If aged correctly, the bird's skin will look good underneath the feathers. You may be surprised by the mildness of the smell, too. A pheasant drawn shortly after it is shot has a violent odor; you would guess that it is half-rotten already. It is not. The viscera of an aged rooster can be removed in the kitchen, where you are likely to do a better job than you would in the field.

We all talk about "cleaning" game. It's Anglo-Saxon queasiness, but we're stuck with it. The problem is that cleaning sounds like water -- maybe even a soak. Don't do it unless the pheasant is badly bloodshot. Wild birds are clean and healthy already; they must stay in top condition to survive, because no one feeds them antibiotics. Save all the blood you can, like a European chef preparing a free-range chicken in the kitchen. When the pheasant is cooked, you can call the blood "juices." They make the best natural sauce in the world, without cream. Unlike most holiday dinners, this one will leave you in good shape for chasing your next pheasant.



The cooking is easy, once you get over two pitfalls.

First, if you have a great chicken recipe, don't use it for wild pheasants. The basic pheasant method given below does not work for chickens, either. (The sauce fails.) The two birds are relatives, genetically, but in the kitchen as in the field, they are at opposite extremes.

Second, avoid moist heat for pheasants in good condition. For leftovers, a pie is all right; and braising lets you make something edible with a cock that has been shot-up or skinned. If there is a moist-heat method that can develop the flavor a pheasant ought to have, however, we have not found the recipe. We have tried clay pots, crock pots, oven-bags, pressure-cookers, casseroles, and pans with tight lids. We have tried every additive from mushroom soup (an American tragedy) to flamed brandy (a French farce). We have sampled every dish friends brought to game dinners. Some of the sauces were good. The thighs were not bad. The breasts were best pushed to the back of the serving dish for somebody else.

High-fat methods taste better. Every year we fry a few of the youngest cocks in a little bacon grease, and the old-fashioned gravy is a treat.

Roasting, however, has for centuries been known as the best of methods for pheasants -- and less fat is needed. Our ancestors spit-roasted in front of a fire, with a drip pan underneath. Sometimes they added elaborate ingredients. We have found the method equally adapted to simple recipes in modern ovens.



Roast Pheasant -- Basic Method

Pheasant aged & dressed as above, skin intact

1 tablespoon olive oil

2 tablespoons butter

1 cup game-bird stock (in an emergency, chicken broth)

1 bay leaf and 6 peppercorns

Sweet sherry to taste

Salt to taste

Bread stuffing -- with chestnuts if possible

Half an hour before you start to roast the bird, heat the stock in a small saucepan. Add the bay leaf, peppercorns, feet, skinned neck, gizzard, heart, and any blood left from the body cavity. Cover and simmer while the pheasant is roasting. Add the trimmed (deveined) liver for a few minutes at the end.

Have the bird at room temperature for even roasting. Do not truss it, and heat the stuffing separately. A stuffed and trussed pheasant would force you to overcook the breast in order to make the stuffing safe.

Use a thick pan just a little larger than the bird, with raised sides. Melt the butter and olive oil over medium heat till a drop of water sizzles when flicked in. Spend ten minutes searing the pheasant from as many angles as possible, turning with tongs (not a fork). The breast skin in particular should be nut-brown.

Turn the bird on its back and put it (uncovered) in an oven



heated to 350 degrees. After thirty minutes -- less if the bird is small -- check. Lift the pheasant with tongs and pour the juices from its body cavity into the pan; they should be barely pink. Prick the breast with a sharp two-tined cooking fork; the juices that run out should be slightly pink or just clear.

Put the bird on a carving board and cover with foil to keep warm. Pour the sherry into the roasting pan, scraping with a spatula to mix in anything stuck on the bottom. Pour in the simmering stock and all of its contents. Reduce at a slow boil while you test for taste, adding salt and more sherry as needed.

Strain what is now the sauce back into the small, empty pan in which the stock was simmered. Retrieve the heart, gizzard, and liver from the strainer. If they still have any flavor, chop them and add to the sauce. Discard the rest of the material strained out of the stock.

Carve the pheasant with a very sharp knife. Make a deep horizontal cut between wing and breast on each side, then slice the breast lengthwise into thin slices. If you do it right, almost every bite of the breast will have a piece of crisp skin, like Peking Duck. The thighs and pieces off the back should be good too. Save the carcass and tough meat from the legs for making stock.

Plates should be warm. Spoon sauce over the sliced meat and the stuffing. Think of the stuffing not as a separate dish but as a pheasant-surrogate that soaks up sauce, stretches the dish, and rewards you with one of the world's great flavors.