

Wild about eating game

In most provinces it's illegal to sell the most local of meats. Jacob Richler says it's time to rewrite the rules

by Jacob Richler on Sunday, October 28, 2012 11:00am - 0 Comments

Earlier this summer I enjoyed a sampling of the exciting range of what good restaurant dining might be like if the rest of us followed Newfoundland's lead. It serves as a culinary example to other provinces, hopefully inspiring them to draft their own legislation allowing the controlled sale of game meats.

The setting was the **Clubhouse**, the West Coast Fishing Club's premier lodge in the Haida Gwaii, on the northern tip of Langara Island, within sight of Alaska. The occasion was their annual **David Hawksworth and Friends Culinary Adventure**, a ne plus ultra salmon-fishing trip cum culinary retreat. And the guest chef was the Alsatian-born **Marc Thuet**, who teathed on a wooden spoon and was given a hunting rifle for his third birthday.

As it happened, in my capacity as liaison between the Toronto chef and the Richmond, B.C.-based fishing club, I had been charged amongst other things with the job of passing along Thuet's shopping list. So I can tell you first-hand that organizers were unfazed by the chef's requests for *kinome*, or sea urchin (which they plucked from Langara rocks), but slightly stumped by his request for a half-dozen seagull eggs. I can also attest to the fact that while the club shared Thuet's conviction that a game menu would be just the ticket for the setting in the northernmost wilds of B.C., they also felt that some of his proposed menu phrasing would best be toned down in deference to the sensibilities of the gathered anglers. For example, following their request while writing the menu, I typed "*civet* of wild game" in place of Thuet's admittedly more evocative "*civet*-of-everything-I-shot-last-year."

The menu began unchallengingly enough with a salad of baby tomatoes and cherries plated with a soft, creamy *burrata* Thuet had tossed up, all drizzled with a warm vinaigrette studded with bacon. Then there was an elaborate composed salad of Parisiennes of melon, seared scallops, thin-sliced cured duck, shavings of foie gras torchon, and a sea urchin vinaigrette. And then, with the crowd nicely buttered up and expectant, the wild things started to flow.

The aforementioned *civet* was a ragù of uncommonly deep, rich flavour, nicely offset with smooth, creamy gnocchi made with fingerling potatoes and mascarpone. As the diners tucked in, they were so preoccupied with the news that the supple and flavoursome slice of ham draped over top came from a leg of bear that they completely forgot they had no information as to the identity of the diced braised meats composing the *civet*. But when the answer came—wild venison, wild duck, grouse, more bear, and a splash of beaver tail—some jaws dropped, but no forks. Some gasped, some laughed, but either way they carried on happily.

Next, there was loin of white-tailed deer Thuet had shot near Ontario's Georgian Bay, cooked sous-vide, then briefly seared. It was plated with a slice of braised pork belly, a cube of head cheese rolled in panko and fried crisp, leek purée, onion choucroute, glazed baby vegetables and a drizzle of venison jus. After a fantastically original dessert of sharp Dragon's Breath cheese enveloped in chocolate feuilleté with chocolate sauce and sorbet, I sat down with Thuet to talk about what a shame it was that such fantastic, wild Canadian ingredients were prohibited from the restaurant table.

"I don't care," he said. "At my next restaurant that's all I'm serving."

Which you might take to mean that he is soon headed to court—or Newfoundland. Or perhaps instead as a reflection of his passion, an inspiration to lobby for change in our game laws. A little balance between conservation and culinary fulfillment cannot be hard to achieve. Europeans have been hunting and eating wild boar for thousands of years and they are still overrun with them. There are so many bears prowling the woods around our cottage two hours outside of Toronto in the Kawarthas that one is discouraged from letting children walk in the woods alone with candy in their pockets. The bears break into peoples' cottages constantly; last spring, someone snapped a photo of a cub perched on his porch railing, downing the sugar water from his hummingbird feeder as if it were a tequila shot. The local road is overrun with wild turkeys. Surely we can follow Newfoundland's lead and spare a little something for the restaurant table?