

The Opinion Pages

A Dinner of My Doing

By **Frank Bruni** April 12, 2013 10:32 am

My friend scrunched up her nose.

“You shot this?” she asked, referring to the two birds—or, rather, the breast meat from two birds—on the table in front of us on a recent night.

“Maybe,” I said. “I shot two birds, a pheasant and a partridge. But we can’t be sure the ones I shot are the actual ones we’re eating right now. These are definitely from that same hunt, though.”

“I could never shoot a bird,” she said.

No, she could only eat one.

And it’s that kind of disconnect, so prevalent, that made me curious to have a hand for once in killing an animal I was prepared to ingest. If I’m fine—if we’re fine—with someone else tackling that assignment in the service of our dinner, shouldn’t we be fine with tackling it ourselves?

That was my thinking when I went hunting, for the first time, last week. I described that trip in a **column**, noting that hunters’ rights and potential inconveniences are often mentioned by opponents to new restrictions on firearms. I figured that a brush with hunting, no matter how fleeting or limited or contrived, might give me at least a few new insights into that opposition, a few new questions about it. And it did.

Some readers wrote to me to complain that my experience of hunting

wasn't a wholly representative one. They're right. It was confined to birds, and it was done not in the wild per se, but on a preserve, or hunting grounds, where pheasants and partridges are raised—and then let loose—expressly for hunters, or shooters, or whatever the right noun for those of us visiting preserves is. It's hunting, of a sort, made convenient. Hunting lite.

But such hunting isn't uncommon at all. In Pennsylvania alone, as I noted in my column, there are more than 300 bird preserves.

And to the extent that the birds in these preserves are raised only to be shot, well, the pork and beef and chicken that's sold in supermarkets or served in restaurants come from animals that are raised only to be slaughtered, and usually from animals raised in much more confined circumstances than the birds on the preserve, which roam in large pens prior to their release.

I visited the Pennsylvania preserve with the chef Seamus Mullen, whose restaurant Tertulia, which serves Spanish food in Greenwich Village, I adore. He had hunted many times before, and not only at preserves, and he offered to be my tutor and guide.

Before we turned our attention to the actual birds, he had me shoot clay pigeons, for practice, because I'd never previously fired a shotgun. Or a handgun. Or a rifle. Or anything other than the kind of weapon you use in a game like laser tag, which I've played with nieces and nephews.

He schooled me in gun safety. And only after that did the three of us—Seamus and I and a friend of his named Ernie Sabine, who is the designer and owner of the New York menswear and men's accessory label Ernest Alexander—grab the preserve's Brittany spaniel, which would find and flush out the birds for us, and spread out through the fields and forests of the preserve.

Between us we shot 17 birds in all. I definitely shot one of them, a chukar partridge, or chukar, and probably shot another, a pheasant, though there was some confusion about who had hit that particular bird.

And that elicited a strange brew of feelings. There was a bit of an adrenaline rush. Some nervousness. Some anxiety. Some squeamishness. Even some sorrow, for lack of a better word.

And overarching all of this was indeed a sense that there was something honest about what I was doing, to the extent that I was taking ownership, if only partly and briefly, of how my food came to me and where it was coming from.

I emphasize partly. Seamus gutted the birds. Seamus plucked and cleaned them. And he cooked them, for a dinner two nights later, to which I brought three companions.

For the gastronomes out there, here's a bit more detail about *how* Seamus cooked the chukar and the pheasant that we ate:

He deboned the legs, ground the flesh and seasoned it with pimenton, garlic and other herbs. The ground meat was used in a paella-style rice made with brown chicken stock and with a jus that incorporated the birds' innards.

The breast meat of the birds was left on the bone, browned in duck fat, and then smoked over oak wood on a grill before being carved and served, in petal-shaped pieces, over the rice. On the side was a sauce made with the jus and with butter, sherry, several kinds of pepper and braised mushrooms, among other ingredients.

On top of the rice Seamus put not only the breast meat but also a few pheasant eggs poached in duck fat.

It was a great-looking dish, and if I were more adept with my iPhone's camera, and hadn't been taking the pictures of the meal in such a dark room, you'd see that.

But I recounted Seamus's construction of the dish not just as an exercise in food porn but as a bridge to the following observation: by the time the dish

appeared in front of me, so much had happened—so much that I’d had no hand in—that I felt nearly as disconnected from it as if the meat had been bought from a butcher.

I didn’t look at it or take a bite and think, “That’s my quarry. That’s my doing.” I thought, “That’s delicious, and apparently has something to do with my hunt the other day.”

It didn’t taste better, worse, more or less immediate. It just tasted like dinner.

With one difference. As I chewed one bit, one of my teeth clamped down on something small and hard: a bit of bird shot, apparently. In the final picture below, on the left of the plate, you can see something that looks round and metallic. That’s it.



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BOOKS | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A New Breed of Hunter Shoots, Eats and Tells

By **DWIGHT GARNER** OCT. 1, 2012

Who is the most famous hunter in America? If you're over 30, the first names that come to mind are probably Sarah Palin, Ted Nugent or Dick Cheney. If you're under 30, the answer is easier. The most famous hunter in America is Mark Zuckerberg, the billionaire founder of Facebook.

In May 2011 Mr. Zuckerberg made a pledge to consume, for one year, only meat he had hunted or slaughtered himself. He got a hunting license and shot a bison. "My personal challenge," he explained, is "being thankful for the food I have to eat."

If four new books are any indication, Mr. Zuckerberg is the decidedly nonmacho, non-pickup-driving embodiment of a new breed of American hunter. These young memoirists have loaded their rifles and shotguns for complicated reasons, including culinary one-upmanship. Nothing wows jaded dinner guests like a braised shank of calf moose that you've recently "harvested" and "dressed" — hunting euphemisms for killed, skinned and disemboweled — before bringing it to the table.

What feels counterintuitive and new here though is this: These writers have largely taken to hunting, they say, for ethical reasons. They've read their Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser, their Peter Singer and Jonathan Safran

Foer, and are intimate with the horrors of industrial meat production.

They no longer wish to have an anonymous hit man between themselves and supper. They want to thoughtfully stare their protein in the face, to take locavorism to blood-flecked new heights. What they desire, as Tovar Cerulli puts it his new book “The Mindful Carnivore: A Vegetarian’s Hunt for Sustenance” (Pegasus), is as follows: “To eat with my eyes wide open.”

The woods this fall, these books imply, will be crawling with iPad-owning, J. Crew-wearing Natty Bumppos. Be prepared to duck.

Typical among them is Lily Raff McCaulou, the author of “Call of the Mild: Learning to Hunt My Own Dinner” (Grand Central). When she was in her mid-20s, her book explains, she lived in New York City and worked as a personal assistant to a movie director. She grew tired of urban life. Like a character in a Diane Keaton film she moved to rural Oregon.

Ms. McCaulou had never hunted. Once in Oregon, she says, and wanting to feel more connected to her meals and to the land, she purchased a Benelli Nova pump-action shotgun in the youth size for \$419. She took a hunting safety course. She began shooting larger and larger game. “Elk guts,” one hunter tells her, “are the real test.”

Her friends and “hippie, blue-state parents” were dumbfounded. “Won’t you be the darling of the right wing?” her father says. To her, it was “a bizarre version of coming out.”

The bulk of Ms. McCaulou’s book combines hunting stories with entreaties to be thoughtful about where dinner comes from and grateful for nature’s bounty. After blasting that elk, she leans in and says, “Thank you. I’m sorry.”

Women are the only demographic of hunters still on the rise, Ms. McCaulou notes, and she champions killing your own protein as “a final

frontier of feminism.” That’s an idea the food writer and blogger Georgia Pellegrini also picks up on in “Girl Hunter: Revolutionizing the Way We Eat, One Hunt at a Time” (Da Capo).

Ms. Pellegrini’s childhood was even more privileged than Ms. McCaulou’s. Ivanka Trump was a classmate at her Manhattan prep school. Ms. Pellegrini was as an analyst at Lehman Brothers before the collapse. She then worked at restaurants like Gramercy Tavern until she became a writer.

Her book has a Carrie Bradshaw meets Annie Oakley vibe. (A better title might have been “Lead and the Single Girl.”) She buys her first guns and then flies around the country and to England to blow things away, mostly in the company of men and usually with aged Scotch and good cigars the night before. She’s an exotic meats tourist.

She repeats, without much analysis, hunting clichés about how being outdoors is more important than mowing down animals, clichés that the writer Joy Williams has torn apart in her Esquire essay “The Killing Game,” collected in her book “Ill Nature” (2001). Ms. Pellegrini can also be banal. About the Mississippi Delta region she intones, “It is a place of such sweet sadness, of nostalgia, of blues pioneers and in some ways of hope for what could be.”

But I liked the way she pays attention to class issues, noting how expensive hunting has become and how much of the prime hunting land is available only to the wealthy. She is piquant too on sexism in hunting. When a married hunter snaps her on the bottom with a greasy dish towel, she recalls the misogyny of four-star chefs and “the jacked-up Lehman Brothers traders giving me a little tap when they were feeling particularly high on life or a little lonely after a long day at the office.”

Ms. Pellegrini wants to pay what she calls “the full karmic price” for her meals. In an observation few carnivores will protest, she says, “The duck you pluck will taste so much better than the one you don’t.”

The most touchy-feely of these memoirs is Mr. Cerulli's "Mindful Carnivore," which begins at a Buddhist retreat. Mr. Cerulli, who lives in Vermont, was a vegan for many years and thought that in being an herbivore he had found "the moral high road, the one true path to a harmonious, harm-free relationship with my fellow creatures." But he comes to find that there is harm in industrial farming too, and he simply can't deny his own wild instincts. When his doctor tells him he needs more protein in his diet, he picks up a rifle.

In a line that could have been written by any of these authors, Mr. Cerulli declares that hunting "would not put me on a new high road to moral certainty." He adds, "If this first experience of killing a deer was any indication, it would bring me face to face with ambiguity every time."

A counterpoint to these memoirs is "Meat Eater: Adventures From the Life of an American Hunter" (Spiegel & Grau) by a young writer named Steven Rinella. He grew up hunting, and on his television show, also called "MeatEater," on the Sportsman Channel, he comes off as equal parts Mark Wahlberg, Marlin Perkins and Ernest Hemingway.

His book will not convert vegans. There are long descriptions of his virile lifestyle; for example, how his house reeks of warm blood when he is making jerky. But he arrives at many of the same conclusions the other three do, and he is persuasive about hunting's upsides: "adventure, communion with nature, physical activity, a love of process and acquired skill, and a desire for an intimate connection to one's food."

Does the kind of sensitive, ethical hunting explored in these books have, as they say, legs? Mr. Zuckerberg's personal year of slaughter ended in May. His self-improvement task for 2012, he has said, is to spend more time coding.

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