



Sons of the Gun

In Washington, the gatherers have inspired the hunters to go from farm-to-table to forest-to-fork.

| By Nevin Martell | Photography by Benjamin Tankersley |

Reading a menu these days can feel like flipping through an Audubon Society field guide. Vermilion's Tony Chittum offers bison hanger steaks as a special; golden-yolked pheasant egg shines in 1789's springtime morel starter; Thunder Burger grills up elk patties; and Jeffrey Buben's forthcoming American brasserie, Woodward Table, will feature wild boar chop, venison ragu and grilled pheasant when it opens later this fall. So what's firing up this forest-to-fork movement in DC?

Turns out, a number of chefs like to ditch their aprons and skillets for camo jackets and rifles. Brasserie Beck's Robert Wiedmaier and Bayou Bakery's David Guas go hunting together for goose, turkey and white-tailed deer, whenever they get the chance. Both were introduced to the sport by their fathers, who taught them how to chase down, take down and break down wild game. For Wiedmaier, who showcases rabbit potpie at Brasserie Beck and quail breast on a crispy Gruyere potato pancake at Marcel's, it's an almost spiritual pursuit. "It allows you to be a part of the full circle," he says.

While the law currently prevents chefs from serving the spoils of their hunting trips in their restaurants, these expeditions nonetheless influence the creative process. Wild game will feature prominently at Bryan Voltaggio's Range when it opens in Chevy Chase this month, and it pops up routinely at his flagship Volt. The *Top Chef* favorite often grabs his rifle and heads over to Carrollton Manor Farm, just outside his homebase of Frederick, Md. He goes to protect the fields full of heritage greens,

GAME ON Marcel's' roasted breast of Maryland goose with hen-of-the-woods mushrooms, cauliflower puree and caramelized figs was inspired by one of chef Robert Wiedmaier's countless hunting trips, where he nab ideas for game dishes on his restaurant menus.

herbs and root vegetables that are grown for his restaurants, but are often ravaged by marauding herds of deer. "I only go out hunting to use the meat," he says. "Of course, if I get a 10-point deer, I'm mounting the head on the wall." His classical chef training makes him strive for meticulous marksmanship in the field. "I don't just go out there blasting animals," he says. "If I shoot an animal in the wrong spot, I'm pissed. I don't want to have ruined loin meats."

Even though Guas doesn't serve any wild game at Bayou Bakery ("It's not the right venue for it"), he enjoys preparing it in the field after the hunt and for his family at home. "If you kill an animal, you have to pay homage to it by properly butchering and fully eating it," he says.

Buben has been an avid huntsman since his father and uncle took him out for rabbits and squirrels in the Pennsylvania countryside. As he's grown older, it's evolved from a simple hobby. "Working in the restaurant business, you give up your time," he says. "Hunting is an escape." This passion fueled him as he designed dishes for Woodward Table, which spotlight wilder proteins in rustic preparations. "After a growing interest in eating local, game is the next logical step," he says.

These chef-hunters go out into the field to slip away from the pressures of restaurant life, maybe to bag dinner and to enjoy an American tradition. Inspired by the hunt, they return to the kitchen brimming with ideas. In the end, they score big for their diners, who don't have to crouch in a deer blind for hours to get a primal taste of the wild.