

You are what you eat

by SCOTT HEIMAN

Consider the following statistics about food waste in Australia (these figures come from www.ozharvest.org):

- Australians are throwing away food worth \$5.2 billion a year, with the average household wasting \$616 worth.
- Australians waste close to three million tonnes of food per annum, or 136 kilos per person.
- Australians discard up to 20 per cent of the food they purchase. This amounts to one out of every five bags of groceries they buy.
- An estimated 20 to 40 per cent of fruit and vegetables are rejected even before they reach the shops—mostly because they do not match the supermarkets' excessively strict cosmetic standards.
- Dumping a kilo of beef wastes the 50,000 litres of water it took to produce that meat; throwing out a kilo of white rice will waste 2,385 litres; and wasting a kilo of potatoes costs 500 litres!

There are now 7 billion humans on the planet as of October 31, 2011—all wanting to be fed—and yet this waste continues daily in mammoth proportions.

On an associated issue, Jamie Oliver's series of programs and documentaries such as *FOOD Inc* have drawn into focus the industrialised farming practices which turn poultry, pig and cattle into chicken nuggets, sausage and hamburgers. They canvas the lack of quality of life of confined animals and the diseases and illnesses linked to factory farming practices such as mad cow, foot and mouth and others, which whilst less exotic, are no less dangerous. They also consider the use of antibiotics, hormones and the like and the potential side effects for both the animals and their ultimate consumers. While views differ on the extent to which the living conditions for farmed animals are, or are not humane, it is hard to see past the view that many factory farms are large, profit-driven companies which view animals as units of production rather than living creatures—and which exchange animals' health and welfare for efficiency and profit.

The industrial scale of waste and the industrial scale of unpleasant-

ness associated with industrialised farming practices are both ubiquitous features of modern society. And yet, it would appear that the majority of the population that depends on such industry—what I like to call *Homo urbanesis*—are not even aware that it's happening. Recently my wife Kath and I watched the ABC show *Kill it, Cook it, Eat it* and its spin-offs. The show highlights where meat comes from—I kid you not! It takes young people from the streets of London into the farm, abattoir and factory to inform them of the processes that puts food on the plate and accessories in the cupboard. It brings these people face to face with the reality that it takes the death of an animal to provide their food. The hope is that, if these people know something about the method by which farmed animals live and die, they may better value their byproducts—their favorite hamburger, handbag, lipstick, car seat cover or fine china (to name a few).

In this context, I recently found myself reflecting on how lucky I am to belong to a hunting family. I fondly remember duck shooting with Granddad and Dad in the late 1970s when I was 5 or 6 years old. I also remember when I was 7 or 8 catching my first fish off Lennox Head Beach (it was

options on restaurant menus. If kangaroo or camel is available, I don't even look at the rest of it (with the exception of checking if they have lemon meringue pie for dessert!). And it won't surprise you to know that, when honeymooning in South America in 2008, I simply had to try guinea pig and alpaca. The only real caveat that I impose on wild foods is that I will not eat animals on threatened species lists.

While I really enjoy the taste of wild meat, I often find reluctance among my friends and colleagues to venture beyond 'the norm'. When offering them game meat, I am always faced with people saying, "Eeew!" or "Game meat is tough" or "I can't stand the gamey taste". The funny thing is that, nine times out of 10, these same people have never even tasted, let alone swallowed, game meat or wild caught fare.

When Kath and I were married at the National Zoo and Aquarium (we had organised an after-hours reception), our waiters distributed platters of kangaroo, emu and crocodile hors d'oeuvres. At the time, several of our guests observed that it was kind of like eating the exhibits! But what I didn't hear, from anybody who tried the food, was anything but praise for the way it tasted. In fact, many refused to believe that they were eating anything other than lean beef and chicken! To this day, I still sometimes hold barbecues, cook up wild caught food and don't tell people what they are being served. Interestingly, they always respond positively to the flavours.

So why is there such reluctance among the general community to eating game meat? After all, modern humans only developed agriculture 10,000 years ago after 200,000 years

of consuming a wide variety of plant and animal material. The truth is that there are a number of factors at play here. On the basis of personal experience and discussions with a mate who has been a professional chef in a number of five-star restaurants in Sydney, I think it boils down to the following issues:

- Many people are genuinely scared of, or have been peer pressured against, game meat or wild caught fare due to social pressures and conditioning.
- Identifying it as 'wild caught' forces people to acknowledge it has been killed rather than produced wrapped in plastic at the supermarket.
- Some 'lay chefs' simply do not know how to prepare nor cook game meat (and can't be told otherwise). The bottom line is that it should either be cooked:

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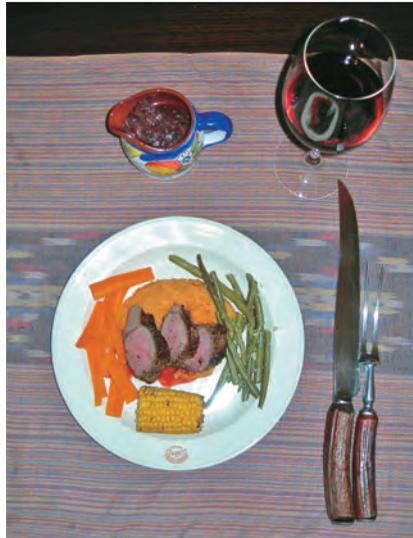
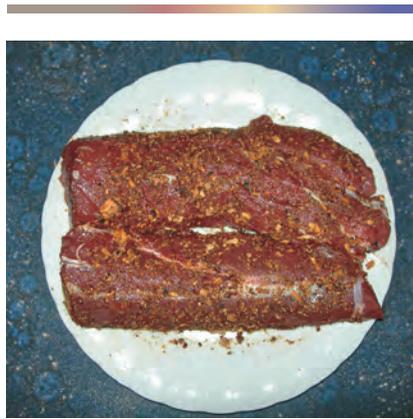
* low and slow (ie. low heat and for a long time – including resting the cooked meat), or
 * hot and quick (ie. over a high heat and using wok style cooking).

- Most people are presented with the latest trophy for dinner. In these circumstances, flavour will be affected by many variables, such as:

* adrenaline (ie. if the animal has been wounded or has ‘jumped the string’ or has been alerted to the hunter’s presence) and
 * any multitude of hormones (eg, if the animal was taken during the rut or whilst in season).

- Most commonly, multiple problems are at play with a combination of all of the above (eg, the wrong cut of meat from a tainted beast has been cooked using the wrong style of cooking, accompanied by the wrong accoutrements and presented poorly).

I have always been a proponent of a saying that was once shared with me by a friend’s father. He said that: “Regardless of cost, the best wine you will ever have is the one you enjoy with friends over a meal having a good time”. For me, I like to add another element to this philosophy. Specifically, I believe that the best meal you will ever have is the one you have with wine and good friends, knowing you have contributed towards sustainable food practices and the animal that you have hunted and cooked has led a quality life.



So the real question is ... are you a hunter, a shooter or a just a consumer?

It is with this closing thought that I present to you a recipe from a recent dinner party held at my house. The participants included me, my wife, a friend who has had negative game meat experiences and another who had never tasted game meat, or the wine variety that I served with it.

It was a resounding success.

Encrusted Venison Backstrap

Ingredients

- 1 venison backstrap, trimmed*
- Olive oil to taste:*
- Your favourite herbs and spices or conventionally sage, rosemary and thyme.*
- Sweet potatoes*
- Other vegetables of your choice*
- Wine*



For me, herbs and spices comprise a little garlic, Murray River pink salt, dried Tasmanian pepper berries, a mix of native herbs, some finely diced dried shiitake mushrooms and flaked almond. For the wine, I would suggest a Cabernet Sauvignon, Sangiovese or Zinfandel depending on your herbs and veggies. (I love cooking with wine; sometimes I even put it in the food!).

This time I paired the venison with a 2005 Sangiovese from Lowe Wines in Mudgee.

Method

1. Pat backstrap with olive oil.
2. Grind garlic, herbs, salt, pepper berries, dried mushroom and almond in a mortar and pestle.
3. Place the ground herbs on a plate beside the oiled backstrap then roll it in the herbs.
4. Seal the backstrap on a hot plate for 30 seconds on each side,
5. Final cooking with a lid over the top should only take a matter of minutes, testing that it does not get too firm, do the thumb test to medium rare.
6. Rest under foil for five to 10 minutes, slice into medallions one inch thick
7. Serve on a bed of sweet potato mash and your favourite veggies on the side

Sauce

1. Using a separate pan, add a little olive oil about the same time you start your mash
2. Sauté some fresh mushrooms, leek and a little garlic.
3. Add a little wine (preferably the one you are going to drink with the meal).
4. Reduce while the meat is resting.
5. Drizzle over the top of your plated meal. And *voilà—bon appétit!*