

## After The Harvest: What Next?

By John Dyer

So you've shot a heap of ducks. What next? All game meat, both from feathered and furred game, is not only delicious gourmet material, but extremely heart-healthy besides. And it's relatively easy to prepare and even kids will love it. Yet every year we hear of someone's birds being left to go green and then dumped. Largely we suspect this is a product of our modern age, when the knowledge of how to process and cook game successfully has not been passed on. So here's what Granny would have told you with a few modern time saving twists.

Putting a good meal on the table begins the moment you shoot the duck, (pheasant, goose, etc). It's essential that your game meat be kept cool. If you use dead parries as decoys, for instance, and leave them in the hot sun all day, probably even the dog is going to turn his nose up at them as the meat will not only be green but pong as well. In a maimai, look for the cool side to hang game and shift them if the rising sun should start to fall on them. Don't pile them up as this traps heat and again, they can go green. An old trick is to take a strip off a flax leaf, (from a flax that you've planted in your back yard in anticipation or pinched along the way to the maimai). Thread this strip through the ducks beak, through its' nasal holes. You don't need to tie a knot if you run the flax round the beak and back under itself. Two ducks tethered this way fit over a nail easily and the air around them quickly cools the meat.

Don't throw the birds in the punts' bilge water. It tends to matt their feathers down and makes them less pleasant to deal with later. Any outboard fuel sloshing around could also taint the meat. Same too with a Landrover deck that's covered in diesel or the like. If you're not able to process the birds soon after you get home, hang them in a cool spot out of the sunlight until you can. Forget about all you've heard about hanging game for weeks. In "the old country" people would reputedly hang pheasants until the body fell off the strung up head. Perhaps if there's snow outside the whole time, we might get away with such practices too, but in more temperate climates, a few days is the max. Sniff the meat when you process it. If it doesn't smell appetizing then, it's not likely to get much better before cooking, so don't put the processing task off any longer than strictly necessary. This is especially the case with pheasants that have been hard hit up the backside. If the released gut juices start to percolate the body cavity, it'll take on a distinctive smell that'll never leave. Gut that bird as soon as possible even if you don't pluck it until later.

To breast the duck, (pheasant, goose etc), simply take a pinch of skin from under the feathers and pierce it with a knife. Get your fingers into the hole you've now made and peel the breast skin back. If you've got a bit of it coming away, get the palm of your hand under it and peel it back to expose the entire breast. With a sharp knife, cut either side of the keel bone, (the big bone in the middle of the 2 breasts). The knife will go

down a centimeter or so until it strikes a large flat bone underneath, which we'll call the breastplate. At the tail end of the breast, run the knife from the keel bone and along the breastplate, following the later closely. As you lift the breast off, work close to the breastplate toward the head end of the duck. Eventually you should have the breast largely detached up to the wing. Now look for the wishbone at the top of the breast meat. Just as with the keel, use the tip of the knife to cut down to the breastplate along the wishbone. The breast meat should nearly be off by now. Lift it right up and, working from the bottom of the breast, cut the remaining connection behind the wing. Put the detached meat in a clean basin and start on the other side.

If the breast is excessively bloodied, you might try washing it off, scraping it off or cutting it out. If none of the above work, biff it, as it'll taste funny when it's served. Give the meat a wash down and remove any feathers sticking to it and any visible shot. Dry it fairly well, for instance, by leaving it in a colander. Then pack it in a clean plastic freezer bag – 2 to 3 breasts per bag depending on how many people you have to feed. Squash the bag to remove most of the trapped air, and then tie a knot in it. I then snip off any excess plastic and put this meat package into a second plastic bag, removing the air from that also. This 2-bag system reduces the risk of freezer burn. Before securing the second bag with a twisty, I slip on a homemade label, made from a bit of cardboard from a wheat-bix packet, with a hole punched in it. Label the meat type and date, for instance, "3 x mallard breast, 05/05". Believe me, once the meat has frozen, trying to figure out what it is can be daunting so don't omit the labels.

You'll now have a pile of breasted duck carcasses. What now? You could bury them or put them in the garage rubbish bin if collection day isn't far off. But if it is, and the weather is on the warn side, they soon let you know they're maturing! Putting them in the freezer until the night before is the trick. Just remove any frozen legs with garden secateurs as these tear plastic rubbish bags like they were designed for it.

Most people just breast ducks, and this utilizes the majority of the edible meat. But it's not a bad idea to select a couple of prime drakes and pluck them for special recipes. To pluck birds, simply take a large pinch of feathers and pull against the grain. Repeat until finished! To remove pinfeathers, (the small white fluff under the outer feathers), there are several options. Granny would have rolled up a newspaper sheet and lit one end. By playing the flame under the suspended bird, the fluff is singed off. Do this in a safe place as all too soon the burning paper will be not much longer than your fingers and you'll be wanting to put it down right bloody now! While this measure does at a pinch, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we can do better. For instance, by using a small propane blowtorch of the type most hardware stores sell, or even one of the older pump-up kerosene blow troches. A gas camper cooker will also do the job and it's a handy thing to have in the maimai for making hot soup & coffee as well. You should now have a duck with plucked wings, (up to the first joint at least), and head and legs. Use a small tomahawk to remove these or you might use garden secateurs or even poultry shears.

Now comes the fun part, gutting it, drawing the bird, eviscerating it, whatever you want to call it. Grab that sharp knife and make 2 cuts. The first is in the throat area. This is so you can poke the hose or tap into it and flush the cavity out. The second cut is from below the breastplate bone toward the anus. In fact, you might want to cut the latter out at this point, and some say you should also cut off the Pope's nose, which is the end knob on the carcass. Try not to cut any entrails in the process of making this slit. Reach through the slit with 2 fingers remove the gizzard, the heart, lungs and entrails and drop them into a bucket. Using a bit of stiff hose, a teaspoon handle or the like, run it up and down the backbone to remove the material attached either side. Give the whole thing a good rinse and see what's left. Any yellow fat can probably be left if it doesn't come away readily. Any charred feathers left from the singeing can be rubbed or pulled off and the whole carcass should now look good enough to be sitting in a supermarket. When finished, leave the duck sitting on its bottom until it drains.

Again, put the duck in a freezer bag; remove as much air as possible and seal with a string knot. Put in a second bag, remove the air from this too and secure with it a twisty and a homemade label with the meat details, especially the date. Most meat will freeze successfully for 6 months. You might stretch this to a year, but expect some meat to get freezer burn. If it's not too bad, you might get away with cutting it off, as it will otherwise spoil the taste.

There are thousands of recipes for duck, be it in crock-pots, conventional ovens, microwaves or even barbeques. You should be able to find good game cookbooks without too much trouble in larger sports shops. In England and Europe, game shooting is largely the prerogative of the rich so cookbooks from there tend to use all sorts of expensive and exotic ingredients. In contrast, NZ and USA published game cookbooks tend to be much more down to earth and practical. The Internet is also a brilliant source of game recipes.

Game is so incredibly good for you because it is so lean. But this means that you can also dry it out all too easily in the oven and it can be as tough as old boots. This is why many cooks try game once and give up. But don't despair, to entirely avoid this, here are a few tricks: You can bard the roasting bird with bacon strips and tie these on with string. The melting bacon fat keeps the bird moist. A cheaper way is to use an oven roasting bag that keeps the juices in. Or if roasting, you can cover the roasting dish with tin foil, which seals everything in also. Just remove it near the end so the skin gets browned. If you think the duck (pheasant, goose, etc), may be done, use a thin sharp knife and pierce the duck breast all the way to the breastplate underneath. If it then bleeds red, give it a while longer. If it's clear it's done. If it's still a somewhat bright red, then it's probably still rare underneath, though light pink juices are fine. If no juices run at all, whip it out of the oven quick as it's already well done. Remember that some recipes are for domestic ducks which are high in fat and much larger birds. So if using gamebirds for these, you'll probably need to reduce cooking time considerably and you ignore advise

to pierce the body all over to release fat, in fact, you'll be doing the very opposite. You want every little bit you can get.

Lastly, here's a tip for that special meal. Serve it with wild rice, which is a traditional nutty flavoured accompaniment for wild game. Whoever draws the duck needs to keep back some liver, (flat, brown, soft stuff). Fry this with some diced bacon. Boil the wild rice until it's soft but not overdone. Tip it in with the fried bacon and liver and toss it around a little to blend in the taste. Wild rice is not cheap, but a little goes a long way. It's delicious with duck or goose. Bon appetite!



**First "catch your fast food".**



**After plucking, singe off the fine feathers left.**



**Secateurs are useful to remove wings (past 1<sup>st</sup> joint).**



**To remove fine bones from pheasant leg, cut skin deep only.**



**Pull over a nail and the fine splinters will come free, making the leg meat useable.**