

Fowl Play

Local chefs turn to game birds
to add depth and variety to
winter menus

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Wild pheasants.



Game bird hunters know that a good bag means hearty meat dishes for the winter table. Whether it's an upland game bird like pheasant or quail, or waterfowl like geese, this feathered flock offers a palatable change of pace from same old, same old chicken, and the savory smells and flavors of game bird being served at area restaurants this time of year will have you calling in your reservation in no time.

TASTES LIKE CHICKEN?

Pheasant, quail and goose sound interesting enough, but discerning diners know that taste trumps everything else. Does the standard response of “it tastes like chicken” apply to these birds?

The chicken analogy is perhaps closest to the fairly white meat of pheasant. Chef Josh Galliano of Monarch described this semi-wild cousin to chicken as being “pretty mild,” particularly so with farm-raised species. “It [tastes] very much like chicken, with the skin being a littler crisper,” said Galliano, whose smoked pheasant breast, offered as a special in November, is likely to make an encore this month.

Sidney Street Cafe chef-proprietor Kevin Nashan agreed, adding that pheasant can be a good introduction to game bird because it does not

Sassafras Valley Farm's gray
Toulouse and white Embden geese.





have a gamey flavor. “It’s nuttier than chicken and there’s some nice yellow fat in there. If you like turkey, you will love pheasant,” commented Nashan, who is showcasing a dish of pheasant breast and leg on the restaurant’s current menu.

Quail is likewise fairly mild, making it a good choice for a variety of preparations. “It’s surprisingly mild for such a dark-colored bird,” said Wes Johnson, chef de cuisine at Eclipse. “It doesn’t taste like chicken. It’s more like the dark meat off of a wild turkey.” Johnson has been running periodic specials of grilled quail served with braised lentils and roasted sweet potatoes, and for a recent private event held at Eclipse, he prepared grilled quail salad: delicate semi-boneless quail resting atop a bed of greens tossed in raspberry vinaigrette and creatively garnished with coriander candy. Reminiscent of brittle, the citrusy, sugared coriander paired well with the tangy fruitiness of the dressing while enhancing the distinct flavor of the quail.

Stuffing the bird is another strategy. To prepare lacquered quail at The Schlafly Tap Room, executive chef Andy White stuffs the bird with a mixture of brioche and spicy sausage. White slow roasts the bird, basting it with a combination of pomegranate molasses, chicken stock and *mirin*, a Japanese sweet cooking wine. White explained that the sweetness of the

glaze balances the spiciness of the sausage stuffing.

Justin Leszcz of YellowTree Farm, who raises quail, squab and other small birds as part of his boutique farming operation in Affton, called quail a “dark, rich meat.” The urban farmer added that compared to other farm-raised quail, the meat from his quail has “twice the darkness and twice the richness. It’s really, really red.” As part of the diet for his animals, Leszcz milk-finishes them, mixing powdered milk into their grains.

Farm-raised birds are generally tender and taste less gamey than their wild counterparts, which is the case with geese from Sassafras Valley Farm in Morrison, Mo. “Very clean and rich” is how Terrene executive chef Brian Hardesty described the taste of the Sassafras geese he uses to prepare the seared goose breast at the Central West End restaurant. Sassafras’ breeds of German Embden and French Toulouse geese are free-range and natural pasture-raised; they thrive on a diet of artesian well water, natural grasses, clover, trefoil, dandelion and crabgrass along with vegetables, fruits and grains. Sassafras’ “Mother Goose” Connie Cunningham, now in her third year of production, brings the waterfowl to market when the geese are seven months old (and weigh an average of 7 pounds) “because they’re very tender and young but fully mature size-wise,” said Cunningham.

(Sassafras’ geese are sold whole and frozen or smoked and ready to serve at Straub’s in Clayton and Local Harvest Grocery in Tower Grove.)

FRESH WAYS WITH FOWL

Searing, roasting and grilling are oft-used cooking methods for game birds, particularly when working with the meaty breast, yet chefs are hardly going to toss the rest. In fact, thighs, legs, wings, some innards and skin can be used to prepare numerous other meat treats like sausages, meatballs, terrines and cassoulets, which can be served on their own or as a secondary component of a bird dish.

For example, Hardesty’s pan-seared goose breast is just one element of a dish that also includes a savory crêpe of goose leg confit, rutabaga and chanterelle mushrooms. A confit is a French method of preserving meat – especially poultry – by cooking it slowly in its own fat. Once the goose leg is tender, Hardesty removes the fat and shreds the moist, delicate meat. To complete the dish, Hardesty plates the crêpe and seared goose breast napped with red wine demi-glace and a garnish of crispy goose cracklins, accompanied by sautéed Brussels sprouts and blue cheese-stuffed figs.

Over at Sidney Street, Nashan serves the menu’s Wisconsin pheasant breast with a “ballotine” of pheasant leg, although he’s adamant about keeping the meat together rather

Terrene's pan-seared goose breast with a crêpe of goose leg confit, left, and Sidney Street Cafe's pheasant breast with ballotine of leg.





than shredding it. This requires deboning the leg, tenderizing it with pomegranate or sorghum molasses, wet-curing it overnight, rolling it up and sous vide cooking it for three or four hours, then crisping it and cutting it into roulades, or thin slices. “This allows us to keep it whole and give it respect,” said Nashan, “but it’s a hell of a lot more labor-intensive.” The dish, he said, “is really screaming for potatoes, but we kind of fake it out with cauliflower.” A cauliflower purée and thyme reduction lend the creaminess that a potato would proffer without masking the flavor of the pheasant, explained Nashan.

But perhaps the ultimate in game meat cookery – and creativity – is required of White every February, when the chef is tasked with preparing owner Tom Schlafly’s private game dinner. “His hunting buddies pile up everything they killed on me. There will be 15 different species of animals and there are always a ton of birds,” said White. “We do a grand, funky type of buffet.” Black bear egg rolls and antelope rice balls may be part of the big game banquet, but small bird dishes like partridge terrine and diminutive dove breasts prepared in the manner of a country-fried steak add to the glory of the season’s meaty fare. “I just love little game birds!” cooed White. **S**

GRILLED QUAIL WITH BRAISED LENTILS AND ROASTED SWEET POTATOES

Courtesy of Eclipse’s Wes Johnson

4 SERVINGS

¼ cup honey
1 cup water
4 semi-boneless quail
1 cup French green lentils
2 Tbsp. olive oil
1 onion, chopped
1 tsp. thyme
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 celery ribs, chopped
2 carrots, peeled and chopped
1 cup chicken stock
Salt and pepper
2 cups sweet potatoes, roasted

- Mix the honey and water, then pour the marinade over the quail.
- Place picked-over lentils in a heatproof bowl and add boiling water to cover them.
- Heat the olive oil in a large pot. Add the onion, thyme, garlic, celery and carrots and sauté until the onion has softened.
- Drain the lentils and add them to the pot. Add the stock and simmer until the lentils are tender but not mushy, about 13 to 15 minutes.
- Drain the lentil mixture and season to taste with salt and pepper.
- Grill the quail for 3 to 5 minutes per side.
- Serve the quail with the lentils and sweet potatoes.