

Edible Traditions

DUCK HUNTING: A WAY OF LIFE IN THE MID-SOUTH

By Jennifer Chandler



I have never truly understood the allure of duck hunting. The idea of waking up before dawn on a chilly morning to stand in freezing water has really never appealed to me.

So when I had the audacity (as it was implied when I broached the subject) to question why people duck hunt, several of the most avid hunters I know were happy to explain why I had the wrong attitude toward one of the most popular outdoor sports in the Mid-South.

“There is nothing like the beauty of the early morning, especially in timber. You and your good friends ready to go, the dog shivering with anticipation...it’s an incredible experience,” enthusiastically described Howard Stovall, who hunts on his family farm in Mississippi with his brother Gil. “The challenge of the hunt, the camaraderie with good friends and family, and the delicious rewards...all of these are the reasons people hunt,” added Stovall.

Coors Arthur, who has been hunting with his father and grandfather since age three, probably summed it up best with the simple statement, “It is a way of life for people in this area.”

He was quick to point out that we are lucky to live in an area with access to some of the best duck hunting in the South. The Mississippi River valley provides ideal winter habitat for migratory birds.

Every year all the men in Arthur’s family head to Arkansas after Thanksgiving lunch and don’t return until Sunday night. “Before I

married Shelley, I made sure she realized that I would be leaving every Thanksgiving weekend and every Christmas Day to hunt with my family,” stated Arthur, “It’s a tradition.”

“It was important for me to take my son at age three,” added Arthur, “This year will be the second full season with four generations of my family hunting together. Grandad is now 86 and I know it means a lot to him to have his great-grandchild with him.”

“I don’t miss a weekend during hunting season,” said Mike Hawkins. Like Arthur, hunting has been a tradition in his family for generations. “My dad taught me how to hunt,” explained Hawkins, “And I have several of my grandfather’s guns.”

“It is so great being close to nature,” he continued, “We start months ahead preparing the fields and gathering the right decoys. Then just before the season opens we get our blinds ready. A lot of preparation goes in to a successful hunt. It is truly an adventure.”

“Duck hunting is a challenging sport. People talk about that great shot for years. So much goes into a good hunt—being in the right spot, at the right time of day, having the right number of decoys,” concurred Stovall.

Both Stovall and Hawkins plan to share their love of hunting with their children just as their fathers did with them. “In the past, my five-year old has helped me prepare the fields. He just loves to ride



Three generations of hunters—Left to right: George Arthur circa 1940 at Horseshoe Lake; George and his son Coors, 1974 at Beaver Dam; Coors Arthur and his son Will. Photos courtesy of the Arthur Family.

on the tractor. He really wants to go this year so I ordered him some waders and will let him sit with me and watch,” said Hawkins.

Camaraderie with friends and family is a big part of the experience for Stovall, and for most hunters. The majority of hunters belong to hunting clubs or lease land with friends or family. Hanging out the night before, cooking a big meal and swapping stories is an integral part of a hunting trip.

“When our family hunts on the river, we have a tradition of setting up camp on the bank. Our menu of potted meats of every variety, including sardines, smoked oysters and deviled ham, may not be gourmet but it’s the meal that has been passed down from my grandfather. For us, it’s a delicious feast,” explained Arthur.

Jeff Barry of recreational land development company Barry Properties says hunting is so popular in the Mid-South that it is becoming more than just a time spent with friends. “Hunting is, in a way, the winter version of golf for the businessman. With many ideal spots within 30 minutes of Memphis, it is an ideal corporate executive outing.”

Eventually, though the conversation with each hunter took a lively twist to the edible.

The big reward of duck hunting is enjoying the ducks with friends. Thanks to the freezer, delicious duck meals can be enjoyed months after the season ends. “The birds are almost too pretty to shoot...but

they just taste so good! I assuage my guilt by sharing them with friends,” said Stovall. “If a guy hunts ducks and doesn’t know how to cook them then he is not a hunter. He’s just a duck killer,” he added.

Duck can be prepared so many ways. “Ducks are like squid,” joked Arthur, “Seriously though, you either serve them rare or cook them well done in a gumbo.”

“Any good puddle duck is desirable to eat,” he added, “Those ducks eat rice, corn and beans. The meat from a diving duck, whose diet consists primarily of fish, is not as tasty.” “Puddle ducks” as Arthur refers to them include such species as teals, mallards, widgeons and pintails. All three hunters agreed that most people tend to marinate ducks too much. “The gaminess is part of the flavor of a duck,” explained Stovall.

“I think the texture on a duck cooked rare on a hot grill or in a hot cast iron skillet is better than any marinade,” added Arthur.

If you do want to take a little of the gaminess out, Hawkins recommends soaking the birds in water with salt and cinnamon, both of which help to draw out some of the excess blood.

Every hunter has their favorite recipe. Arthur is famous among his friends and family for his duck and noodles recipe. Hawkins claims his crispy fried duck nuggets will turn even the most finicky eaters into duck lovers.



Lisa May and her award-winning duck gumbo.

But it seems all hunters brag about their duck gumbo.

Each chef has their own signature twist to making what they claim is the perfect gumbo. “The gaminess and earthiness of a duck benefits from sweetness against it,” Stovall said of his gumbo which is now an annual tradition for Super Bowl Sunday.

Just because someone isn’t a hunter doesn’t mean they can’t create wonderful wild game dishes. Lisa May’s duck gumbo turned heads at the World Championship Duck Gumbo Cook-Off in Stuttgart, Arkansas this past November. “I started making gumbo about three years ago because my cute husband is a duck hunter,” explained May who married husband Gerald in 2006, “I really like to cook and this is something we can do together.”

Unlike the hunters I interviewed, May doesn’t like the gaminess, or as she refers to it “that liver flavor” of wild duck. When she began experimenting with her recipe, her first goal was to find a way to take out the “ducky-ness” but still keep some of the earthy wild game flavor. “I talked to a lot of friends and everyone has some bizarre ingredients they add,” May explained. Whereas ketchup and many brand names sauces didn’t end up in her signature recipe, Picapeppa hot sauce did. “It adds a hot, funky flavor.”

“My friend Suki Carson makes a rich chicken stock using Chinese Five Spice. I decided to add it to my duck broth and it adds a cool, interesting bite.” Her other secrets to a great gumbo include cooking the duck on a rotisserie rather than boiling the meat, adding sausage from her mom’s hometown of Monroeville, Alabama as well as using homemade stock.

“There is not a lot of mystique in making gumbo,” humbly explained May, “Just add a sprinkle of this or that until it tastes and looks right.” Despite her newness to the traditions of duck hunting, I can guarantee you May’s secret recipe will earn the respect of even the most seasoned hunter.

Thanks to the enthusiasm of these avid hunters (and great cooks), I am actually now willing to consider braving the elements to give duck hunting a try. Whereas I may not be getting up before dawn too many mornings this season to partake in the hunt, I am definitely planning on accepting every invitation I get for a wild game dinner.

By now, freezers across the Mid-South will be well-stocked with the delectable meat of wild ducks. So if you notice that your neighbor has been getting up before daybreak for the past few months, wander over and ask if he has ducks to spare. Or even better, invite yourself over for dinner!

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Mississippi Alluvial Valley

The Mississippi Alluvial Valley (MAV) represents the historic floodplain and valley of the lower Mississippi River. Easily the most significant winter habitat area for mallards in North America, the MAV runs right through the Mid-South along the Mississippi River.

Once a 24.7 million acre complex of forested wetlands, only about 20 percent of the original forest remains in the MAV today. The rest has been converted to agricultural production.

Ducks Unlimited (DU), which has its national headquarters in Memphis, is leading the conservation effort to protect the remaining wetlands.

Participation in waterfowl hunting fuels the passion of many DU members to give something back to the resources that make their outdoor experiences so enjoyable.

"Duck hunting is a deep tradition here in Memphis," says Jim West, Executive Secretary of Ducks Unlimited, "A lot of people share our enthusiasm for waterfowl and for wetland conservation."

Photo courtesy of Ducks Unlimited.

Duck Gumbo

The key to good gumbo is the *roux*—the classic combination of fat and flour used as a thickener. Roux adds not only body but a toasted nut flavor to dishes which makes it perfect to use with duck. Roux must be cooked slowly when browning as in the following recipe to prevent burning. If you burn the roux there is no saving it so take care to keep the heat low to medium while cooking and stir it constantly. Gumbo is also traditionally thickened and flavored with okra and filé powder (made from Sassafras root). Yield: 4 to 6 servings

4 – 5 pound duck cleaned, boned and cut into 2-inch pieces
8 ounces butter, shortening or duck fat
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 ½ cups chopped onion (about 2 medium yellow onions)
1 cup rough-chopped celery (about 4 stalks)
1 cup rough-chopped green bell pepper (1 pepper)
2 tablespoons chopped garlic
2 ½ quarts chicken stock or broth, low-sodium
2 cups sliced okra, fresh or defrosted frozen pieces
8 ounces sliced, precooked Andouille or other spicy sausage
½ teaspoon cracked black pepper
1 tablespoon filé powder (also called gumbo filé)
2 – 3 dashes hot pepper sauce
2 – 3 dashes Worcestershire sauce
Kosher salt, as needed to taste
Steamed rice, for serving
¾ cup rough-chopped green onions, for garnish if desired

In a large, heavy bottomed pot (with lid) over medium- low heat melt butter, shortening or duck fat. Stir in flour to combine and cook, stirring constantly until the roux is a light golden color. Add onion, celery, bell pepper and garlic and continue to cook, stirring constantly, until vegetables are tender and the roux is a dark golden brown color – a total of about 15 minutes.

Add duck pieces to the pot with chicken stock or broth and okra and stir to combine. Bring to a boil then reduce heat to simmering. Cover and cook on low heat for approximately two hours, occasionally stirring and skimming any excess fat from top of gumbo as needed.

When the duck is fully cooked, the sauce is thickened and flavors are well-blended, add sliced sausage, pepper and filé powder and adjust seasonings to taste with hot pepper sauce, Worcestershire, salt and additional pepper. Continue to cook until sausage is heated through, stirring occasionally. Serve with steamed rice and green onions.

Adapted from Emeril Lagasse, The Essence of Emeril