

Of the *Fallow Deer*, commonly called a *BUCK* and a *DOE*.



# Hart's Desire

*Seeing my darling is absent I can no less do than to send her some flesh, representing my name, which is hart<sup>1</sup> flesh for Henry, prognosticating that thereafter, God willing, you must enjoy some of mine... No more to you now at this time, mine own darling, but that a wish I would we were together an evening. With the hand of yours, H.R.<sup>2</sup>*

So wrote king henry viii of England while in hot pursuit of Anne Boleyn, the second of his six wives. The gift of luxurious red meat was a potent symbol of love, but there was more to his note than that. Wordplay was the language of a cultivated person in Tudor times; Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night* has the lovelorn Duke of Orsino playing on “heart” and “hart” with their connotations of the chaste and the chased, portraying himself as the hunted hart pursued by the hounds of his desire. He extends this metaphor to Viola, disguised as a lad but secretly in love with Orsino, who unwittingly compares her to Diana, goddess of hunting. So you may speculate for yourself as to exactly what Henry had in mind when he and Anne were finally “together an evening.”

Henry's words portray beliefs associated with deer and venison, beliefs which permeate many centuries and cultures and some of which are still present today. Deer have at various times represented fidelity, timidity, resurrection, and regeneration in some cultures; strength, virility, and uncontrollable lust in others. In different times and places, deer as mythical and pagan creatures appear in fertility rituals, as the prophetic curse of a family, or as a cult around which the Scythians revolved. Some people regarded them as a social dividing line. John Manwood's *Treatyse of the Laws of the Forest* (1665) mentions that although venison was the privilege of the nobility, “those deer that are not sweet nor meet to be eaten by the best of people...The flesh shall be given to the poor and the lame and the head and the skin shall be given to the poor of the next Town”<sup>3</sup>—a practice

Left: A fallow deer. Fallow deer were held in much lower esteem than the red deer stag, or hart, which was considered the ultimate higher game. From Edward Topsell, *Historie of Foure-footed Beasts* (1658).

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hardly likely to enamor the ordinary person to venison. Small wonder, then, that to this day people's feelings about deer and venison are sometimes confused or ambivalent. Are deer noble lords of the forest, or are they pests ransacking our gardens and spreading Lyme disease? Is venison, with its naturally low fat and healthy proportions of essential Omega-3 and -6 fatty acids, the modern diner's dream, or is it, thanks to Bambi, in some curiously sentimental way different from other animals and thus taboo to eat?

Whichever the attitude, there can be no denying that despite increasing urbanization, the urge to hunt deer remains firmly part of our culture. If the world's ten largest armies were combined, the number of soldiers would still be fewer than the number of Americans who go off every

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year in pursuit of white-tailed deer. The majority are armed with rifles, shotguns, and handguns, though a substantial minority—about a quarter—slip into the woods armed only with bow and arrow, the deliberately primitive nature of this hunt being its principal attraction. Where does this urge come from?

In primitive societies, the importance of hunting, coupled with the element of chance, inevitably led to superstition and ritual. The strength and quick senses of deer earned them enormous respect, and their extraordinary annual cycle of antler re-growth, culminating in the wildly extravagant

rutting behavior of the mating season, came to represent the marvel of nature's eternal regeneration of life, as well as male potency. It is not at all unusual to encounter hunters today who, for no logical reason, become profoundly upset at the thought of domesticating deer. Perhaps they cannot bear the idea of the untamable stag—epitome of male virility—accepting docility. It is as though the hunter feels he might regain, or at least understand, something in the wild animal that man has lost; if you remove the wildness from the stag, you deprive the man of his dreams.

This notion comes directly from medieval attitudes to deer, religion, hunting, and chivalry. A white hart (stag) appeared frequently in Arthurian legends to lure a knight to some mysterious place to face his rite of challenge. Other poems about the hunt, alluding to the chase with man's conquering and devouring of the deer, were often sexual allegories. But hunting was good because it trained men for war and kept them from the dreaded sin of idleness. The hart attained an extraordinary reputation for immense longevity (anything from a hundred to fourteen hundred years depending on whom you believed) as well as an ability to regain its youth by casting off earthly riches, destroying the snake of evil, and thereby achieving immortality. It also symbolized Christ's Nativity and Passion and even, in the form of a white hart, represented Christ himself.

The white hart as Christ appears in at least three similar tales where a nobleman or king is either converted or inspired to found a religious order after being accosted by a stag, which proves to have a crucifix between its antlers. One of the best-known tales involves St. Hubert, the patron saint of deer hunting. His feast day, November 3rd, is celebrated at the village of St. Hubert in the Belgian Ardennes. (Anyone wishing to witness an authentic Belgian festival closely resembling a Breughel painting should make every effort to attend.) St. Hubert's relics supposedly cure rabies (and, usefully, toothache), so after the High Mass, holy water is sprinkled on the numerous well-behaved dogs held up above the throng by their owners both inside and outside the church. Rabies was a serious concern to the medieval hunter because of the crucial role dogs played in the chase; their modern counterparts are present throughout the Mass, standing patiently and happily as the service is punctuated by the rasping, primeval conversation of hunting horns that echoes around the church.

Although the most challenging hunt used dogs in the forest, the many deer parks created in medieval times afforded a more genteel version, sometimes attended by women, to reliably entertain a visitor. There were around two thousand deer parks in medieval Britain. Given the

population at that time (around four million), this is a remarkable number. Hunting for entertainment was a welcome diversion, but these parks also served an important function as reliable sources of meat for the wealthy household. Ordinary people did not have legal access to deer in parks, though clearly many tried their hand at poaching. Shakespeare, for example, was supposed to have been caught poaching deer in Charlecote Park in Warwickshire in 1586; the deer park still exists.

But whether hunted in wild or tame fashion, deer were the stuff of chivalry. Even the way in which a hart or a hind was "unmade," or cut up afterwards, was highly ritualized; everyone knew his rank, in what order the carcass must be dismembered, and who would receive which portion. This even extended to the hounds who had their curée or ritual reward ceremony after the kill. Red deer venison, being classed as "greater game," was an essential component of the medieval table, appearing in most accounts of great feasts. The word "venison," coming from *venari* ("to hunt"), meant "the meat of the chase" and was not originally confined to the meat of deer; wild boar and hare meat were once referred to as "venison." At what point venison came to be restricted solely to deer meat is not clear; but that it was regarded as a noble meat is without question: "I am sure it is a Lordes dysshe...It is a meate for greate men," wrote Andrew Boorde in 1542.<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to deduce how the highly ritualized chivalrous hunting behavior embraced by medieval nobles evolved from their ancestors' primitive chase and their superstitions. Neither is it difficult to understand how the act of co-operative hunting, which required planning as well as bringing home a substantial quantity of meat for distribution, helped to form the beginnings of a social structure.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Samuel de Champlain founded a hunting and feasting club in Canada, initially to raise the morale of his garrison. Coincidentally, he found that his French troops made a lasting bond with the native Canadian Micmac tribe who went out hunting with them. After a disastrous few years of scurvy and depression, de Champlain's *Ordre de Bontemps* proved invaluable:

We spent this winter very pleasantly, and had good fare by means of the Order of Good Cheer which I established, and which everybody found...more profitable than all sorts of medicine we might have used. This order consistes of a chain which we used to place with little ceremonies about the neck of one of our people, commissioning him for that day to go hunting. The next day it was conferred upon another, and so on, in order. All vied with each other to see who could do the



The Pursuit of Fidelity.  
Tapestry. German, ca. 1475–1500.  
glasgow museums: the burrell collection

best, and bring back the finest game. We did not come off badly, nor did the Indians who were with us.<sup>5</sup>

In a hunter-gatherer society, when hunters brought back a large quantity of fresh meat it had to be distributed and eaten quickly before it spoiled. A glut was inevitable, and people gleefully consumed it. Hunted meat was special, of high status, nutritious, and something generally provided by the dominant male—absolutely the right food for a feast, especially when roasted. Even today in many cultures, a feast is meat.

I have a theory that the darker the meat, the longer or more difficult it is to produce and therefore the higher its status. Thus, particularly in Europe and North America, beef was given a higher status than lamb, which in turn was more highly regarded than pork. This even extends to poultry, where peacock, swan, and goose, all very dark meats, were much more sought after than turkey or chicken. As a dark meat, venison crops up at English feasts through the ages, roasted, baked, or turned into elaborate pies and pasties. Venison feasts were a popular event in Tudor times, so much so that Queen Elizabeth I decided that the feasts held in the city of London were getting a bit out of hand. She had the Lord Mayor ban them to avoid “the excessive spending of venison and other vitails in the halls of this cite and which we understand to be offensive to Her Majesty.”<sup>6</sup> This seems a bit mean since Elizabeth was such an inveterate stag hunter herself; indeed, she continued the chase well into her seventies.

In the eighteenth century, entry to some gentlemen’s clubs could sometimes be gained by donating a sufficiently creditable gift. The original charter to the Royal Society allowed “any nobleman or gentleman complimenting this company with venison, not less than a haunch, shall...be deemed an honorary member.”<sup>7</sup> By the nineteenth century, Alexis Soyer, that remarkable chef of Reform club and Sebastopol fame, placed venison alongside turtle as the fashionable “must-have” for a feast worthy of the name. This was around the time when Queen Victoria popularized the Scottish Highlands as a ruggedly romantic place where one roamed the hills in uncomfortable sportsmanlike pursuit of the noble Scottish stag. The cooking techniques of her husband’s native Germany were adopted and became the accepted way to deal with this rich and sometimes tough royal meat. Preceded by lengthy marinating, these long, slow cooking methods using strong spices and sweet fruits were the last remnants of a style of European cooking dating back to the Middle Ages.

But as with hunting traditions, these cooking rituals were perpetuated among what was until recently a very small and select band of venison eaters—so much so, that only in the last few decades have we had another look at cooking this marvelously lean meat. We’ve found that venison is perfect for quick, light cooking, its lack of fat making it surprisingly refreshing for a warm climate, as well as providing the traditional richly-flavored comfort food for cold winter days. These two approaches—slow cooking and *à la minute*—yield

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## ingredients

4 slices (about 1 1/2 lb) osso buco (venison shank)  
1 cup diced vegetables (carrots, onions, garlic, parsnips, celeriac)  
1 tablespoon butter  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
10 juniper berries, crushed  
2 cups strong venison stock  
1/2 bottle red wine  
2 teaspoons balsamic vinegar  
3/4 pound rhubarb, chopped  
2 tablespoons rowan or red currant jelly  
1 pound well-trimmed loin of venison  
Mashed potatoes, leek purée, spinach

## Duo of Venison Osso Buco and Loin

In a large Dutch oven brown the osso buco and diced vegetables in half the butter and vegetable oil, then add the crushed juniper berries, stock, red wine, vinegar, and chopped rhubarb. Simmer until tender, about 4 hours, adding more stock or wine if necessary. Strain the sauce into a small saucepan. Stir in the jelly and cook over medium high heat until reduced and syrupy. Season to taste with salt and pepper and keep warm.

Preheat the oven to 450f. Brown the loin in an ovenproof pan in the remaining butter and oil, then roast it for 10 minutes in the oven. Remove and leave to rest for 10 minutes. Add any pan juices to the sauce.

Arrange the potatoes, leek puree, and spinach on a serving platter. Slice the loin over the top, place a piece of osso buco beside it, and serve with the sauce.

Serves 4.

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results which, delicious as they are, might as well be from different meats, so dissimilar are they in eating quality.

A few years ago I was asked to prepare a venison banquet for an international congress of deer experts. I wanted to correct a few erroneous beliefs, but more importantly, I wanted to demonstrate, in the course of one meal, some of the diversity and importance—both historical and geographical—of deer to man. I presented nine dishes, each consisting of deer produce. Some were culinary curiosities; there were even vegetarian options.

We began with a clear venison consommé, with little stags cut from thin slivers of celeriac dancing in the bowls. A tiny flake of gold leaf floating on top added visual sparkle. The next course was a platter of venison charcuterie—slices of smoked haunch, venison salami, and some dry-cured venison rather similar to Parma ham. These were served with a mixed herb salad. It was hard to limit ourselves to this trio. We could also have added a smooth liver pâté, or a country-style venison terrine—both delicious—or even a slice from a raised venison pie, with a gilded crust as in medieval times.

Then came venison steak tartare. Venison is lean and healthy enough to be ideal for steak tartare, because if the steak has been hygienically prepared from a single uncut muscle, and if it is served immediately, the meat inside is sterile. The tartare was served with a raw egg yolk (from a tested flock), caviar, horseradish sauce, aioli, and pickled gherkins.

The fourth course offered a respite from meat, being a small pouch woven from green and white tagliatelli and stuffed with a soft cheese made from curdled reindeer milk.

My reindeer milk was flown in at great expense from Finland, where research is being conducted into reindeer cheese for the modern market. The nomadic herders traditionally did not sell their cheese, but preserved it in the snow or in elevated caches. The cheese was spiked with crisp carrot strips that had been lightly cooked in mild honey vinegar and spices. The woven pouch was steamed and served with a vegetable purée.

The main course consisted of meltingly tender venison loin, very quickly cooked and served medium-rare alongside a chunk of osso buco (technically, *osso cervo*) slowly simmered in wine and vegetables. The juices from the roasting and stewing—two styles of cooking venison—were combined, strained, and reduced to make a rich, dark sauce. A vegetable cake made from layers of mashed potato, leek purée, and spinach accompanied the meat.

The next course, a transition from savory to dessert, represented a throwback to the dishes served at medieval banquets—a real mincemeat tart. I filled pastry cases with a rich forcemeat of minced raisins, currants, prunes, almonds, fresh apples, grated venison suet, and ground venison. The tart also contained mixed spices, candied citrus fruits, and some brandy to plump the fruit and act as preservative. This tart was served with reindeer-milk ice cream, flavored only with vanilla bean.

The third dessert was another ancient curiosity: hartshorn and hindberry jelly. Hindberry is an old country name for raspberries, presumably because hinds (female red deer) love nibbling them as they pass through the woods. Hartshorn is an ingredient commonly seen in most old recipe books. It is simply antler that has been shaved and then boiled for a long time until it produces a form of

gelatin. I found that ground antler made only a very light jelly, so I ended up adding venison knuckle bones to make it firmer. Clarifying the stock was a lengthy process, but once the liquid had been diluted with white wine and flavored with sugar, mild spices, lemon, and raspberry juice, it made a delicious jelly.

Reindeer milk is extremely rich and syrupy, with a wonderful flavor slightly reminiscent of hazelnuts. The simple cheese course therefore consisted of some soft, fresh reindeer cheese served with fresh hazelnuts.

The meal ended with a tisane made of powdered velvet antler (a Chinese tonic for at least two thousand years) mixed with Hungarian herbal tea. This drink was served with a choice of two liqueurs, Stag's Breath (a Scottish whisky-based liqueur) and Royal Velvet, a fiery ginger liqueur from New Zealand containing velvet antler extract and finely powdered gold leaf that shimmers invitingly.

And so, with gold leaf taking it full circle, the banquet ended. I hoped that after experiencing these diverse flavors, and armed with a little more knowledge of venison's wide-ranging importance to so many cultures, some of the practical-minded delegates would be encouraged to delve further into the background of their specialist subject. And who knows, perhaps they would appreciate that their efforts today are just the latest in a long history of activities in which man and deer have been involved. ☺

#### notes

1. A hart is a red deer stag.
2. This is my translation of the original quotation: "Seyng my darlyng is absent I can no less do than to sende her summe flesche, representing my name, whyche is hart flesche for Henry, prognosticating that here after, God Wyllyng, you must injoye summe of mine whyche he pleased I wolde were now...I wolde we were to gyder an evening." From Frances Hackett, *Henry the Eighth* (London: Johnathan Cape, 1929). Cited in John Fletcher, *A Life for Deer* (London: Victor Gollancz, 2000), 115.
3. John Manwood, *Treatyse of the Laws of the Forest* (London: Company of Stationers, 1665). Cited in Nichola Fletcher, *Game For All* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1987), 120.
4. Andrew Boorde, *A Compendyous Regyment or a Dyetary of Helth* (1542). Edited for the Early English Text Society (London: N T Trubner & Co, 1870), 210–11.
5. Champlain Society, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, vol. 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 447.
6. Cited in Nichola Fletcher, *Venison, the Monarch of the Table* (Auchtermuchty: Fletcher, 1983), xii.
7. J. Timbs, *Club Life of London* (London, 1866).

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