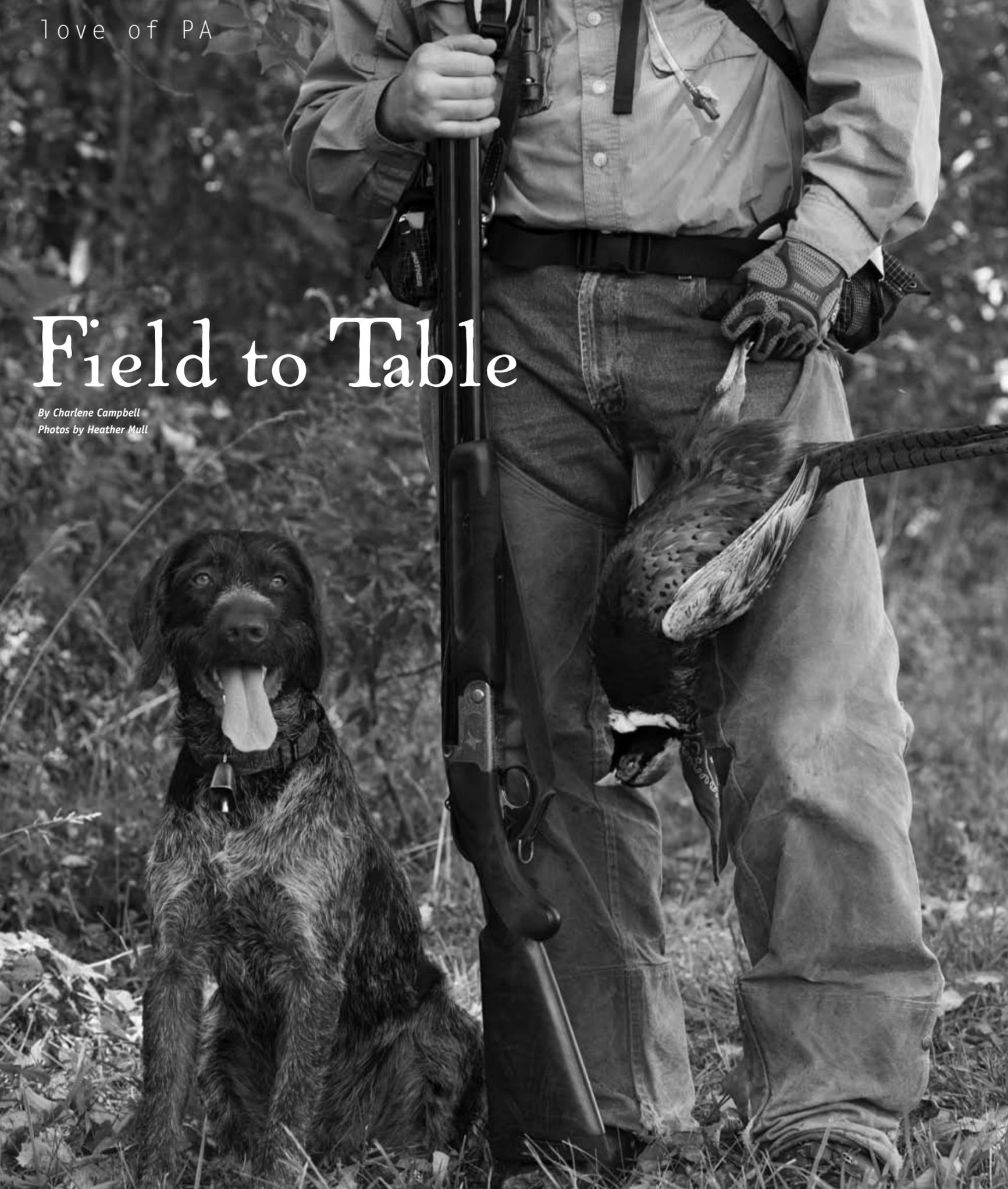


# Field to Table

By Charlene Campbell  
Photos by Heather Mull



**H**unting in South Western Pennsylvania has always been steeped in family and tradition. Most local hunters have learned from their fathers and grandfathers about the best locations, hunter safety and an appreciation of local wildlife. Many hunters in our area are deeply vested in the preservation of native species and have a profound appreciation for our unique environment.

Donny and Jamie Zarra are a hunting family. Donny has hunted since he was a child with his father and his brother and become so involved with the sport that he began training and breeding bird dogs.

When they were first dating Jamie didn't think that Donny was truly interested in her. "He would go days without calling me, and I just assumed he wasn't serious about dating me," Jamie confesses as we are out in the field one early fall morning. "Then all of a sudden I would get a call out of nowhere. I realized it had nothing to do with me - it was hunting season."

Soon Donny's two loves merged as he began taking Jamie out with him in the field. "He started me off slowly. The first few times we went out he would take me hiking, and I just enjoyed the quality time together in the outdoors. Then he would take me out when he was going to hunt and his dog Butter would be out in the field with us. It blew my mind watching him work with the dog in the field. Donny didn't turn me onto hunting, Butter did."

The couple now has Duke vom Buffeltaler (Duke, pictured left), a two-and-a-half year-old Deutsche Drahthaar (German Wirehair), that Donny trained and has taken to first place in the International Armbruster hunting and breed test.

Jamie has fallen so in love with the sport that she even went out while she was pregnant with their son, Donato. "All of the men were whining about how cold it was, and this and that, and I was like, 'hello I'm pregnant!'"

Recently Donny, who is a hunt master for the Alpine Club, a hunting preserve in Bridgeville founded in 1946 by a dozen families for hunting and recreation, has begun to take out their ten year old nephew, Jason Gentile. Currently Jason is learning hunter safety and gun skills, and looks at his time outdoors as an adventure. He tells me that, "Hunting isn't just hunting for game, its discovery," as he goes on to share some of the things he has found while out in the field with the Zarras. As we're talking, a wild woodcock is flushed out

of some stalks of corn in front of us and Donny and Jason tell me how rare it is to see a woodcock in the wild. "See that's the discovery part," Jason says knowingly as we watch it fly off in appreciation.

While many types of wild game are found in Southwestern Pennsylvania, upland birds are some of the most commonly hunted in the region. There's also the opportunity to see ducks and geese making their way south from Canada on the Atlantic Flyway.

## TO THE TABLE

There are endless ways to prepare game birds and one need not be intimidated by the process. The trick is to know if the bird you are cooking has white meat, dark meat or a combination of both. If it has more white meat, you want to be careful not to dry it out. Also take into consideration that wild birds are generally smaller than most poultry, so cooking time should be adjusted according to weight. Another factor is the age of the bird you will be cooking. If you are obtaining the bird from a farm, they might be able to tell you the approximate age. If a bird is younger, you can roast it. If it's older and tougher, a moist heat cooking method should be used. You can apply the same rule to skin or no skin. Skin on means the bird will retain more of its natural juices. With skin off, the moisture will evaporate and the bird will dry out quickly if you're not careful.

**RUFFED GROUSE:** The state bird of Pennsylvania, it is also known as a "wood's pheasant" and sometimes mistaken as a member of the partridge family. Considered by some to be the best game meat around, the breast supplies very white meat while the thighs and legs offer a medium flesh. Medium flesh is not white meat or quite dark meat but rather a nice in between. A pair of grouse will accommodate servings for three people. A single dressed grouse weighs approximately one pound. Grouse work well on the grill and are also great fried or braised. Brush the grouse with an herbed butter mixture before cooking or even a light barbecue sauce. Wrapping a bird that's been buttered and seasoned in a cabbage leaf before placing it on the grill will help to retain moisture. Turn the package on the grill often and remove the leaf and baste again cooking bird another 3-5 minutes or until golden brown. If you are interested in learning more about Ruffed Grouse conservation efforts, visit [www.ruffedgrousesociety.org](http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org).

## Wild About Heritage

Pennsylvania has an overwhelming number of wild turkeys. And yet, these backyard wanderers are not usually very good eating. Due to an inconsistent diet and tough meat they are not something to bank your Thanksgiving dinner on. A great option for turkey that is local, fresh and naturally-raised is the heritage turkey.

A heritage turkey is a farm raised older breed of bird unlike the genetically altered, mass produced breed of turkeys. Think of a heritage turkey as the equivalent of the heirloom tomato. Set your expectations for something smaller and less uniform. You won't get the plump breast meat on these that you may be used to, but the flavor and quality of the meat is so rewarding. Some common heritage breeds are the Beltsville Small White, Royal Palm, Jersey Buff and Bourbon Red. While they aren't difficult to cook, they can be a bit tricky to locate and store.

For turkey talk, we turned to the turkey expert. Chef, cookbook author and turkey guru Rick Rodgers definitely knows his way around a Thanksgiving dinner. Not only does he have prolific knowledge of food history and cooking techniques, he worked for Purdue Farms for years and teaches 10-30 Thanksgiving cooking classes each fall. Through the years he has tried it all. Full of insight and information about the holiday and the bird at the center of the table, Rodgers prefers a straightforward, less-is-more approach to the gobbler.

Rodgers tells us that Heritage Turkeys are a good option if you can find a local source. He suggests getting the bird fresh from the farmer as a heritage bird is naturally lean and has no intramuscular fat to keep it moist, so it can dry out if frozen before you receive it. The industry wants the consumer to believe there is no difference between frozen and fresh because they need to supply 75 million turkeys for one day. If most of the birds weren't frozen it would be nearly impossible to meet the public demand. Rodgers explains that besides drying out the meat, freezing changes the texture. He suggests locating a heritage farm in your area and buying the bird only a couple days ahead. To locate a farmer contact Slow Food via their website, [www.slowfoodpgh.com](http://www.slowfoodpgh.com) or the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture at [www.buylocalpa.com](http://www.buylocalpa.com).

When taking your bird out of the refrigerator on the day you plan to serve it, let it stand at room temperature for at least 20 minutes (although he prefers 45 minutes), so that the flesh doesn't tense up when it hits the hot oven. He points out that a heritage bird is an investment in time, energy, and quality and since they are so delicious, "do as little as possible with them." He is not a fan of wet brining as he thinks it "makes the turkey taste like a ham." Instead he suggests putting kosher salt, pepper, butter and any herbs you may want to use on the skin and letting it sit in the refrigerator overnight.

When you are ready to roast the bird put it into a good roasting pan with short sides, no taller than three inches, any higher and the juices can't evaporate. He prefers All-Clad's roasting pan. Cover the bird with aluminum foil so it doesn't dry out. You will remove the foil in the last hour of cooking to allow the skin to brown. Baste it several times during the roasting period. If you have time, make some homemade turkey stock for the bottom of the pan. Once it reduces, you will be left with truly tasty drippings for gravy. Canned chicken stock will fill in, in a pinch. When pulling your bird out of the oven, check the temperature with a reliable digital thermometer. The temperature should read 180 degrees in the thigh and or 170 in the breast.

You can see Rogers in action at the Giant Eagle Market District on November 10th. He will spend part of the day at the Shadyside store and the part of the day at the South Hills location. Call the Market District stores for details. Be sure to look for the revised and updated version of his holiday handbook - *Thanksgiving 101*. It contains dozens of recipes and tips to make sure your holiday is fabulous and painless. Also keep an eye out for *Christmas 101*- perfect tips, recipes and ideas for the whole winter cooking season.



**PHEASANT:** Low in fat and cholesterol, the pheasant is a good source of protein. A richer, stronger flavor than most poultry, pheasant tends to be a bit drier. The average dressed weight of a pheasant is 1 ½ to 2 ¼ pounds and serves two people. The breast is white meat and the thighs and legs are dark meat. When looking for flavors to pair with it while cooking think of it as chicken and use savory herbs, fruits, mushrooms, cream or wine sauces. Asian recipes can work with the flavor of pheasant, or try something sweet and savory like a maple or hazelnut base with roasted garlic. If you are roasting a pheasant, do so in a low 325 degree oven occasionally basting the bird. Use a meat thermometer and remove the bird when the thigh temperature reads 185 degrees.

Wild pheasant populations have decreased dramatically in Pennsylvania over the past several years, mainly due to habitat loss. Conservation groups such as Pheasants Forever seek to grow numbers by reestablishing suitable habitats for the birds. Local hunting preserves such as the Alpine Club in Bridgeville have created suitable environments for reintroduced birds to flourish in the wild. Each year the club works with the Pheasants Forever group to plant corn and sunflower fields that are left unharvested to provide food and shelter for the birds. A three year program is underway to reestablish the state's population of the birds. 177,000 Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres have been set aside for the project and already it has seen progress here in southwestern Pennsylvania. In cooperation with South Dakota, the state takes part in a trap and transfer program where Pennsylvania exchanges wild turkeys that are abundant here in exchange for the pheasants from North Dakota's stable population. [www.pheasantsforever.org](http://www.pheasantsforever.org)

**BOBWHITE QUAIL:** Occasionally referred to as the "prince of game birds," the bobwhite has a uniform, medium colored flesh over the breast, thighs and legs. The dressed weight is 6 ounces and feeds about two people. The bird is done when the internal temperature reaches 145 degrees. Go with a Mediterranean flavor by stuffing with fresh figs and bacon or pancetta, and wrap with grape leaves. Many southerners use crawfish, sausage or cornbread stuffing in their preparations. If you want to keep it simple, rub with a little olive oil or butter, salt and pepper and stuff a few sage leaves inside the cavity of the bird.

**DUCKS AND GEESE:** The nature of migratory waterfowl makes the meat darker and fattier than that of upland game birds. Wild waterfowl also has a stronger flavor than a domestic duck or goose. Many things can be done with goose and duck, and most find them easier to work with than upland birds. Fattier birds may be roasted while birds with less fat or those that are older are better suited to moist cooking methods. The U.S. Department of Agriculture recommends that you cook the bird to an internal temperature of 165 degrees. If you prefer a rare bird, cook only to 145-150 degrees, and for a well-done bird the temperature should reach 180 degrees. Prick or slice the skins before cooking to allow the fat to render. Ducks and geese do well paired with fruit based sauces and glazes to brighten and balance their heavier flavor. Wild rice or chestnut stuffing and a baked apple makes a great accompaniment. When I am cooking a Christmas goose I will make a stuffing out of brown rice and/or barley simmered in chicken stock, green peppercorns, a hint of powdered ginger, some salt and pepper and a few herbs. A larger duck will serve two people and a goose may serve up to eight people.



## Feathers

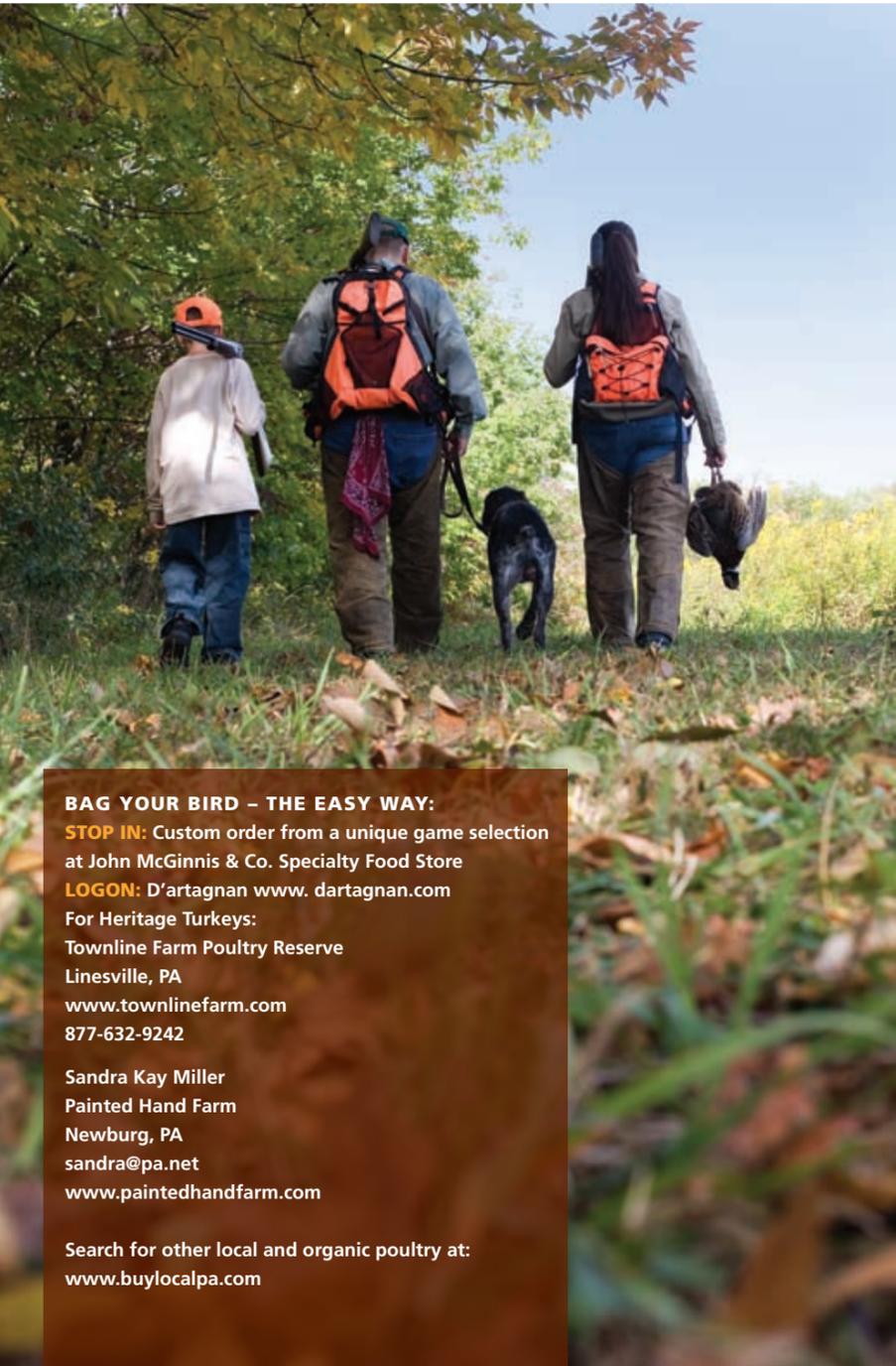
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# simply seasonal

By Rhonda Schuldt  
Photos by Heather Mull

Open a bottle of your best white or rose wine and toast: "To the birds, the hunters, the dogs, and cooks!"



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..... R E C I P E .....

Donny Zarra's recipes:  
 Grouse (or pheasant) di Zarra  
 (Serves Four)

- 4 whole breasted Grouse or Pheasant of your choice or luck.
- 1 cup of flour
- 1 teaspoon of fine black pepper
- 1 teaspoon of cracked black pepper
- 1 optional crack or two of sea salt
- 2 teaspoon of ground sage
- 1 tablespoon of brown sugar
- 1 pinch of ground clove
- 1 pinch of ground cinnamon
- 3/4 cup (or more if you desire) dried cranberries
- 1/4 cup Toasted Almonds
- 2 cups of Rose or Blush Wine
- 1 Stick of Butter
- 1/4 cup of olive oil
- Wild Rice or Rice of Choice
- Steamed Broccoli Chilled and Lightly dressed with Virgin Olive Oil and fresh lemon juice

1. Fillet each skinned breast from bone so you have two individual halves from each breast.
2. Soak dried cranberries in a bowl with Rose Wine
3. Sift flour onto dish and mix with 1 teaspoon of fine black pepper and one teaspoon of ground sage.
4. Dip each breast into lightly seasoned flour
5. Use medium heat to melt 1/2 stick butter into skillet with a little olive oil to prevent butter from burning.
6. Pan sear prepared game on each side until cooked properly. (Be careful not to overcook, wild game, it is much leaner and will cook faster than farm raised fowl)
7. Remove and cover cooked breasts.
8. Add remaining 1/2 stick of butter, and melt.
9. Pinch ground clove, cinnamon, sage, ground black pepper and sea salt into the melting butter.
10. Mix a tablespoon of flour and brown sugar into blush wine and soaking cranberries then fold into the seasoned skillet of butter and reduce.
11. Place two Wild Grouse and/or Pheasant breasts beside rice and broccoli on your best china and ladle reduced sauce across the center of each breast and lightly over the rice. Top breast and rice lightly with toasted almonds.

Recipe courtesy of Zarra's Restaurant in Oakland.  
[www.zarrasrestaurant.com](http://www.zarrasrestaurant.com)

Hunting vests provided by MOTHER: [www.mothertech.net](http://www.mothertech.net)

**Oven-Roasted Cabernet-Glazed Winter Vegetables**  
 This super-easy, flavorful side dish showcasing the hearty vegetables available to us during the colder months is perfect for holiday dinners. The aromas wafting from the oven as the vegetables roast are nearly irresistible. I like to make extra to ensure leftovers, which I puree in a blender with a little vegetable broth and then heat for a hearty soup...a great second act!

**Fresh Seasonal Ingredients:**

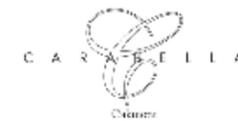
- 1 bunch carrots (I like to use the kind with the green tops still attached)
- 4 parsnips
- 1 red or sweet onion
- 1 pound baby Yukon Gold potatoes
- 1 bulb fennel

**Pantry & Fridge Items:**

- 2 1/2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 teaspoons dried thyme (or 2 1/2 sprigs fresh thyme - leaves only)
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Black pepper, to taste

**Other Stuff:**

- 1/3 cup Cabernet Sauvignon



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Prepare the veggies:  
 Cut the green tops off carrots, leaving approximately 1/4-1/2 inch of green stems, and peel. If small in diameter, leave whole. If large, slice in half lengthwise.  
 Peel parsnips and slice crosswise into 1-inch rounds.  
 Peel onion and cut into wedges.  
 Clean baby Yukon Golds and cut in half (if larger, cut into quarters).  
 Trim fronds and root end off fennel and cut into wedges.



Place vegetables in a large roasting pan coated with nonstick cooking spray. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with thyme, salt and pepper. Toss to coat. Pour Cabernet over vegetables.



Roast uncovered at 375 degrees for about 40 minutes or until vegetables are tender, nicely toasted and the wine has reduced to a thick glaze.

A Passionate Food original recipe © 2007 The Synergos Group LLC/Passionate Food

Rhonda Schuldt is the creator of **Local Goodness**, a project of Passionate Food that celebrates the bounty of fresh, seasonal local products and the people who raise them. [www.localgoodness.com](http://www.localgoodness.com) and [www.passionatefood.com](http://www.passionatefood.com)