



Game Day

Although Thanksgiving tradition decrees watching a football game or two, building your holiday feast around Texas' bountiful wild harvest imbues "Game Day" with a far richer meaning.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY **SUSAN L. EBERT**

When Texas outdoorsmen and outdoorswomen count our blessings this Thanksgiving, splendid autumn hunts resulting in a full larder of wild game often tops the list. And by all means, forage while you're afield — pluck prickly pear tunas (use tongs), pick wild persimmons, muscadines and beautyberries; and gather up pecan and hickory nuts — to add to your enjoyment of the hunt, and to your culinary repertoire as well. These three

"All-Stars" can help you kick off a few game-day traditions of your own.

SMOKED REDHEAD BREASTS

Use a smoker, if you have one; however, a covered charcoal grill gives equally good results. If your smoker or grill doesn't have a thermometer with an external display, pick up an inexpensive one to ensure you keep your smoker setup in the proper heat range, without having to open the door or lid unnecessarily. Be prepared for some "porch-sittin' time" — these take

about six hours, but are well worth the effort!

12 duck breasts, deboned and halved with skin on (recipe tested with redheads; or use any dabbling duck breasts with a nice layer of fat)

To marinate:

4 c. unfiltered organic apple juice

4 c. water

1/2 c. Kosher salt

1 t. Instacure No. 1 (pink salt)

2 T. allspice berries, crushed

2 T. peppercorns, crushed

To smoke:

Pecan, apple and/or cherry wood chunks (Pecan or fruitwood pairs best with wildfowl; hickory or mesquite imparts too harsh a flavor.)

2 c. pure maple syrup, reduced by about half by simmering over low heat

Add all ingredients except duck breast to a large pot and bring to a boil. Simmer for 10 minutes, and then cool to room temperature. Put all duck breasts in the marinade and weigh down with a plate to keep them submerged. Refrigerate in the brine for 24 hours.

The next day, remove duck breasts from brine and pat dry with paper towels. Place on a rack over a baking sheet and let them air-dry at room temperature for at least two hours.

In the meantime, soak wood chunks in water. If you're using a grill, you'll want to smoke the duck breasts over an indirect fire, so prepare your grill with coals only on one side, and let them reach the white-hot stage. You'll want to achieve a steady internal temperature of 180 to 200 degrees inside the smoker or grill, so get this right before you add the duck breasts.

When you're happy with the smoking temperature, arrange your duck breasts, skin side up, on the other side of the grill so that they're not over the coals and have an inch or two between them to allow the smoke to circulate.

Now, as Tom Petty says, "The waiting is the hardest part." Catch up on your reading, call your mama, sort your tackle box or blind bag, re-spool reels, tie some flies — but whatever you do, don't go far. You'll want to monitor the temperature and add more wood chunks from time to time, as well as occasionally (every half-hour or so) basting the breasts with the reduced maple syrup. You shouldn't need to turn or move the duck breasts, though.

When the duck breasts are thoroughly smoked, they'll be rather firm but still yield to the touch. Let cool, refrigerate what you plan to use within two weeks, then vacuum-seal the rest.



SMOKED REDHEAD APPETIZERS

My husband dubbed these "duck candy" — and they disappear just about as quickly as does a child's Halloween treats. Ridiculously easy — and ridiculously good — these impart a smoky, salty, sweet and savory kick in each bite.

4 Bosc or Red Anjou pears
2 smoked duck breast halves, thinly sliced across the grain
1/2 c. cotija cheese crumbles
16 fresh thyme sprigs
agave nectar

Cut four 3/8-inch rounds from the widest part of each pear and arrange on platter, then top with two or three slices of duck. Sprinkle with cotija crumbles, drizzle with agave and top with a thyme sprig.

Seared Backstrap with Beautyberry Cumberland Sauce

Take a Texas twist on this classic by concocting your Cumberland sauce with wild Texas beautyberries. Serve with roasted garlic-and-horseradish cream-infused mashed potatoes and citrus/agave-glazed carrots.



BEAUTYBERRY JELLY

This is an exquisite jelly in both its sparkling ruby color and enchanting flavor, well worth the trouble of picking and cleaning the clusters of tiny berries, which are a favorite of deer, birds and other wildlife. The taste is indescribable: Beautyberries don't "taste like" anything else; they taste uniquely like beautyberries. Makes about 8 half-pint jars.

- 4 c. washed and stemmed beautyberries
- 4 c. water
- 2 c. sugar
- 1 lemon, juiced
- 4 t. Pomona pectin (do not substitute)
- 4 t. Pomona calcium water (do not substitute)
- 8 half-pint jelly jars

Sterilize your jars, lids and rims, and let them hold in hot water. Simmer berries in 4 cups water for 20

minutes, then use a potato masher or immersion blender to crush the berries and simmer for another 20 minutes. Strain the juice through cheesecloth or a jelly bag; do not press or squeeze the pulp. Place 4 cups of the strained juice in a 4-qt. saucepan; add the lemon juice and calcium water, stir well and return to the stove. Mix sugar and Pomona pectin in a separate bowl until thoroughly blended. Bring juice to a full boil, add sugar/pectin mixture and stir vigorously until mixture returns to a full rolling boil (about 2 to 5 minutes). Fill jars to 1/4-inch from top, wipe down rims and screw on two-piece lids. Process for 10 minutes in a water-bath canner.

Note:

For a special Thanksgiving Day breakfast, whip up a batch of flaky buttermilk biscuits, and serve them piping hot with a slather of butter and a dollop of beautyberry jelly.

WILD CUMBERLAND SAUCE

- 1/2 c. beautyberry jelly (can substitute currant or blackberry jelly)
- 1 c. port (recipe tested with Messina Hof Barrel Reserve) juice and zest of one orange and one lemon
- 1/4 t. dry mustard
- pinch each of salt, cayenne, ginger and ground clove

Whisk all ingredients until blended in a saucepan; simmer over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the mixture reaches 165 to 170 degrees and coats a spoon. Serve warm.

PAN-SEARED BACKSTRAP

To dry-age: Place the backstrap on a rack over a baking sheet and pat dry with paper towels, then refrigerate, uncovered, for 24 to 48 hours. About two hours before cooking, remove the backstrap from the refrigerator, and place in a shallow dish. Pour 1/4 c. olive oil, 1 T. balsamic and 1 t. of crushed



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fresh thyme leaves over this; use tongs to rotate the meat one-quarter turn every half-hour so all sides are coated.

To cook:

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Get a cast-iron skillet piping hot and pour a dollop of olive oil into it. Using tongs, place the backstrap in the hot skillet, and rotate it every half-minute or so until you achieve a nice, even sear all over it. Place the entire skillet in the hot oven for 6 to 8 minutes; remove and tent loosely with foil for 5 minutes before serving. Slice into medallions and serve with the warm sauce.

SMOKED WILD TURKEY

The drought may not yet be behind us, but this year's spring and fall rains and range conditions produced two- and three-year-old Rio Grandes in excellent body condition, and with a nice layer of fat. If you're fortunate enough to connect with one of these well-larded gobblers — as I was this past spring at the Shonto Ranch in Kerrville — by all means, please pluck your bird! Whole turkeys give a far better result in the smoker than do turkey parts, remaining succulent and juicy.

Best of all, volunteering for this task excuses you from the Thanksgiving morn melee of mothers, wives, sisters and daughters in the kitchen: You'll be tending the smoker, most likely with the frosty beverage of choice in hand, preparing "La Pièce de Résistance" for the feast. Kindly request that the ladies prepare a pecan dressing and a sweet

potato casserole as accompaniments.

Three days ahead: Remove turkey from the freezer, and let thaw for two days in the refrigerator or in a large cooler filled with ice water.

One day ahead:

Prepare your brining liquid by filling a 5-qt. pot with water and adding the following:

- 1 c. Kosher salt
- 1 c. brown sugar, packed
- 1 T. peppercorns, crushed
- 12 allspice berries, crushed
- 12 juniper berries, crushed
- 6 bay leaves

Simmer for 20 minutes, then let cool completely. Pour it into a cooler that the turkey will fit in, add the turkey breast side down, and fill the cooler with ice. Add enough cold water to submerge the turkey, latch the lid and brine for 24 hours.

Two hours before smoking: Remove the turkey from the brine and set on a rack over a baking sheet breast-side up; pat dry with paper towels. Let the turkey air-dry for two hours, then pat dry again. Rub all of the outer surfaces with softened butter (one whole stick), then press a mixture of 2T. black pepper, 2 T. salt, 1 T. cayenne, 1 T. brown sugar, 1 t. sage and 1 t. thyme into the skin. For additional moisture, you can place two quartered apples in the cavity.

To smoke:

Applewood chunks impart the best flavor to wild turkey. Get your smoker to a steady 250 degrees, and if it has



a marinating pan — as does my Camp Chef Smoke Vault — keep it filled with equal parts of water, apple juice and a dry rosé, with a smattering of allspice and juniper berries, a few bay leaves and a bouquet garni of fresh sage, thyme, oregano and rosemary. Smoke for about 25 minutes per pound; the internal temperature should read between at, or just under, 160 degrees. Remove the entire rack with the turkey on it to a work surface, and wrap the whole shebang up loosely with heavy-duty foil; the temperature will rise to the necessary 165 degrees, and the juices that have been drawn to the surface by the heat will recede back into the meat.

To serve:

First, remove each leg by bending the drumstick upwards to pop it from

the socket; use a sharp knife to sever the tough ligaments. Remove the wings in the same manner. Starting against the breastbone, work the point of the knife against the bone, then angle it in under the breastbone, slowly releasing the meat from the ribcage. Pop the thighbones from the carcass, and with a forefinger, scoop out the tasty morsel (known as the “oyster”) between the backbone and where the thigh attached: Eat these as your reward for your arduous, masterful smoking efforts. Remember to carve each breast half across the grain for maximum tenderness. Arrange the ready-to-be-devoured gobbler on a platter, hoist it victoriously and proceed past your admiring guests to the dining room table. ♣

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