

Duck, Duck, Goose

Game on! Tamar Adler heads to California's Sacramento Valley to try her hand at bird hunting—and gets acquainted with the mysterious and seductive flavors of untamed meat. Photographed by Eric Boman.

In the duck blind, it is close and warm. Marsh stretches flat on all sides. Beside me are three friends who hunt together often: Loretta Keller, a taciturn San Francisco chef with bright blue eyes; Angelo Garro, famed here in Northern California for taking his own wild-boar salami and homemade wine wherever he goes; and our host, the almost impossibly friendly and handsome Charles Thieriot, whose family has owned and conserved these 18,000 acres in California's Sacramento Valley for more than a century. We are all in camouflage waders and hold shotguns by our knees.

I have never tasted wild duck. I have always loved the lavish flavor of the domesticated sort. As a child I loved Peking duck, served head-on, with warm pancakes and thick plum sauce; then I loved crisp-skinned duck breasts or confit, served with fruit compotes. As I grew and developed an appreciative appetite, I loved all of France's at once resourceful and luxurious duck pâtés.

I am here to hunt the wild variety, a taste for which may well be coming over the culinary horizon. At least aesthetically, wildness is today's dominant culinary inspiration. At Copenhagen's Noma, reindeer lichen is served on a bed of moss, and asparagus are served with edible shoots and pine branches as though blown in on a gust of wind; the specialty of El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain, is a king prawn served with a pool of seawater foam on a slab of rock. So many of today's gastronomical trends are backward-looking, consciously admiring what is vintage and heirloom and homespun, that soon we may arrive back at the beginning: man holding a weapon, facing an animal.

It would in many ways be very good if we did. Wild meat is the most sustainable sort we eat. It is generally more healthful than any raised on farms, and its carbon footprint is nearly invisible. Duck is among the most abundant wild game there is, though what one buys from butchers or orders in restaurants must by law be raised on farms. (This is also true of venison, bison, rabbit, and any other meat one thinks of as wild.)

Having no ethical or philosophical objections to hunting, I have decided I cannot fully understand the flavor of wild duck if someone else wakes at dawn, trudges into cold wilderness, and kills one on my behalf. So here I sit, beside Merle Leighty, the Thieriot's gamekeeper. I have strict instructions: I am to stay motionless until he leans in, points to a duck in flight, and says, "Take him," at which moment I am to stand and shoot it from the sky.

First there is the largely administrative process of becoming a hunter. I do not think of it until the week before my trip to California. This creates a mad scramble. I must take a ten-hour class, and there are few in late autumn—experienced hunters do not want to waste the season's precious days in a classroom. I am lectured on this over the phone by a gun instructor in Westport, New York, a tiny town on Lake Champlain about 300 miles from my home in Brooklyn. He promises, though, that if I am at the Westport Fish & Game Club two days later, he will sign my card, and I will be legal.

That errand completed, I board a flight to San Francisco, where Charlie greets me and takes me northward. His family is old and familiar here—Charlie's ancestors founded the *San Francisco Chronicle*, endowed the de Young Museum, and seem to deserve credit for much of the cultural scaffolding of the Bay Area. He is also a distant friend of mine; despite its size, Northern California is like a small town. Once you have lived here, as I have, you seem, at least indirectly, to know all its inhabitants.

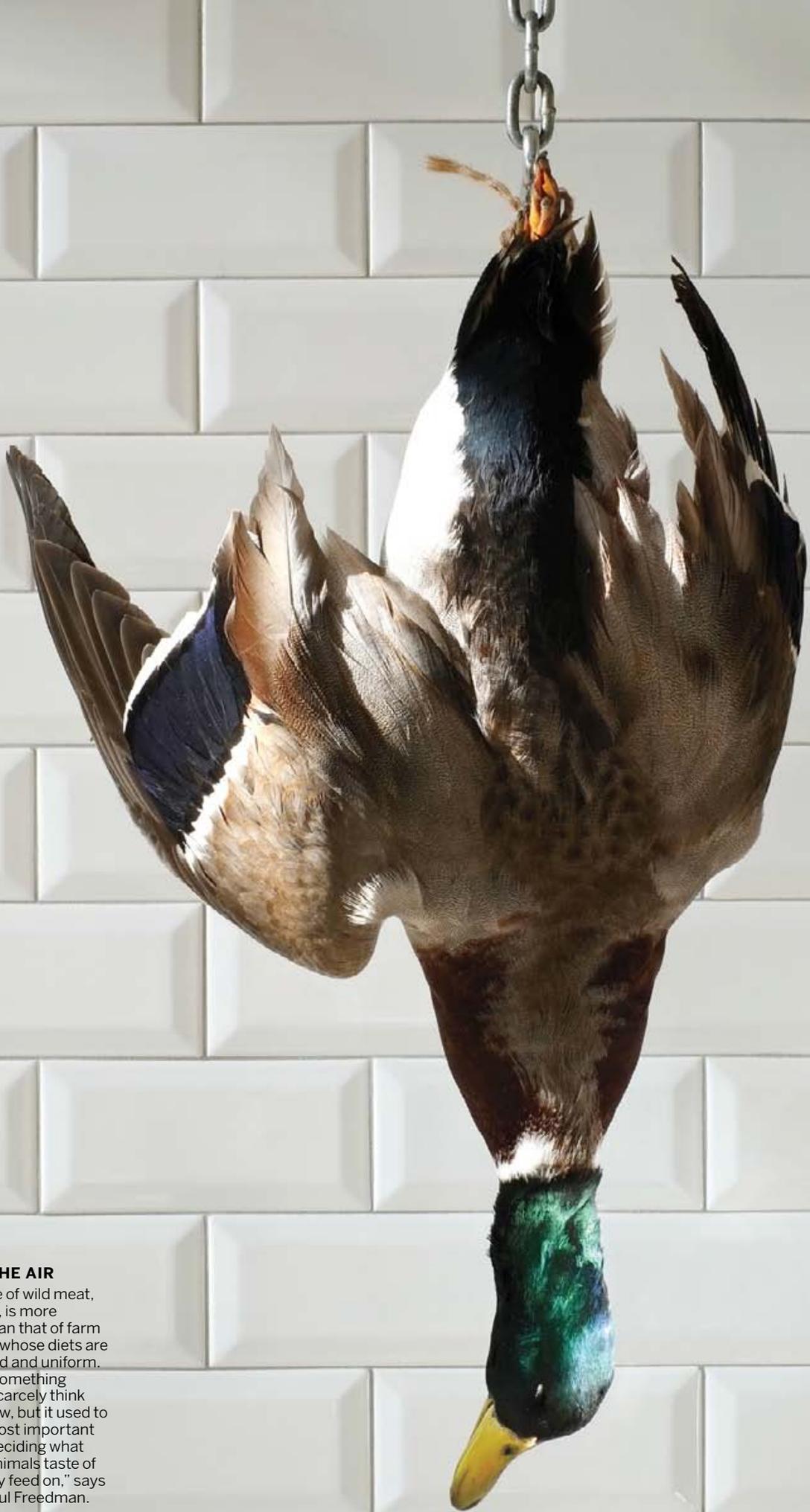
The Thieriot property, Llano Seco Rancho, is a few square miles larger than Manhattan and very like the great private hunting reserves of medieval aristocrats: thick with ponds, wide oak savannas, native forest and walnut groves. Regal blue peacocks, tiny quail, and stout pheasant scatter around the road as we turn through the gates.

In a little orchard by the main house, Charlie sets a dark iron grate over a five-foot-wide fire pit and gathers the almond wood on which we'll cook chops from Llano Seco's heritage-breed pigs for dinner. The fire pit is surrounded by fruit trees. As we stand by the growing fire, Angelo teaches me to suck the strange, pungent fruit out of green loquats that have fallen to the ground. We sit at a long table on a porch, around lovely old duck-decoy centerpieces and the dark pink pork with wild rice that Loretta has had sent from Minnesota. "Actually wild," she says. The grains are long and dark and uneven. The taste is rich and severe.

Before we go to bed, I want to talk about what we will cook tomorrow. Julia Child provides ten duck recipes, all more or less approachable, including the inevitable à l'Orange, Caneton aux Cerises, and Caneton Braisé aux Marrons. *Larousse Gastronomique* lists 41, including one with crystallized turnips in cider, which sounds enticing; one for duck with maple syrup, about which I have a morbid curiosity; and one for "wild duck à la Walter Scott," which calls for clarified butter, duck liver, foie gras, apples bonne femme, whiskey, and something called Dundee marmalade.

There are much older recipes, too; a taste for wild game has been in and out of fashion for

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UP IN THE AIR

The taste of wild meat, like duck, is more varied than that of farm animals, whose diets are controlled and uniform. "This is something people scarcely think about now, but it used to be the most important part of deciding what to eat: Animals taste of what they feed on," says Yale's Paul Freedman.

cherishes the patina of furnishings such as the accommodating easy chairs that might have looked right at home in Professor Higgins's voice laboratory; she bought them from George Sherlock's King's Road shop for her first apartment when she was eighteen. They now provide the perfect vantage point from which to watch television in a smaller sitting-room library. She has recently discovered that the battered cotton for Sherlock's signature slipcovers, dyed a vivid pink, is made in Marrakech; in its natural state, this is the fabric that now drapes her windows.

Every school holiday is spent in Morocco, and Eben and his friends, when they are not whizzing under the pergolas on their scooters or tempting sunstroke by the pool, nestle up to watch their DVDs in a cozy sitting room with deep *radassiers* upholstered in the red-and-green stripes of the Moroccan flag, with a *haiti* panel of appliquéd velvet arches hanging behind it, and vintage Egyptian movie posters on the opposite wall.

While the house was in construction, landscape architect Miranda Brooks was working to transform their gardens, establishing a framework of imposing cypress and olive allées that lead the eye to the mountain range behind them. She embellished the formal existing scheme with more intimate garden rooms, providing spaces for quiet contemplation. "I'm a loner who actually needs a lot of company," says India Jane.

Brooks conceived the idea of "looking down on an entirely private world" from the master bedroom. A rill of water leads to a pavilion with fretwork *mashrabiya* screens in soft green to set off its pink adobe walls. On either side of the pale-lilac *zelige* tile pathways that flank that long canal of water, Brooks has planted a mauve-colored garden of westringia, rosemary, and phlomis that rises in great cloudy mounds of silvery-green foliage. Westringia, representing planets, also punctuates a "lunar garden," from which to observe the night sky with its bright constellations and endless darkness.

Brooks established a rose garden and encouraged India Jane to haul over old-fashioned English rosebushes in her father's battered Vuitton suitcases. When she was once stopped at customs with this quirky and potentially illicit cargo, India Jane protested that she wanted to create an authentic Islamic garden, a place of trickling water and contemplation, and she was hurried on approvingly. Its beds also planted with highly scented clove carnations, this rose garden, which includes the hardier local *beldi* roses (whose petals are used for tea), captures

the atmosphere of a sixteenth-century Persian miniature.

Brooks has faced challenges creating gardens here—and not just because the excellent local nurseries use only the Arabic names for their plants. The gardeners sometimes furrow their own paths for convenience, even though these might take them through a carefully planted hedge or flower beds. But she is awed by the elegance of many of their traditional gestures, such as the way the vegetable garden is constructed, laid out with raised areas like asparagus beds trellised by rills that are flooded every day to water the produce.

"It is so amazing to sit here, breathing the orange blossoms and looking at the beautiful snow-covered mountains at the end of the garden," says Brooks. On misty days, the Atlas range disappears, "but when you see it," adds India Jane, "it sort of becomes alive." □

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centuries. While the Bible's fatted fowl and fatted calves, raised in the barnyard, were thought the superior meat, cookbooks in the Middle Ages—written for those who had leisure to hunt, parks in which to do it, and chefs to pluck and dress and roast their quarry—were suddenly full of wild game. *Le Viandier*, the era's *Joy of Cooking*, dedicates nearly its entire chapter on roasts to hares, fresh boar, venison, larks, quails, pigeons, woodcocks, doves, cranes, and ducks.

In the 1700s, domesticated animals return to favor; then, in the 1800s, the pendulum swings back. Paul Freedman, Yale historian and author of *Food: The History of Taste*, says that in the nineteenth century, the three most prized dishes in America were wild canvasback duck, terrapin, and oysters.

Europeans still love wild foods, and in the E.U. serving meat that has been hunted is permissible by law. Every winter menu in Germany offers venison. The English cook grouse after August 12, also called the Glorious Twelfth. François Mitterrand famously dined on ortolans, wild songbirds, for his final meal. In vast areas of Sweden, where winters stretch long and cold, domestic farm animals are scarce. Impassive Swedes do not bother with the euphemistic "game" (which derives from the sport of catching it) but choose *vilt*, or "wild," for the duck, goose, venison, and boar they like to eat with lingonberry jam. And it may be that Italians—with their wild-boar roasts and wild-boar salumi; hare ragù; risottos of wild nettles; salads of sweet, brittle wild asparagus; innumerable crostini of wild

animals' innards cooked and smashed up—most deeply, and constantly, love the strange, impossible-to-predict flavors of untamed meat.

At 3:45 A.M. I am hurriedly drinking espresso, eating pear crisp, and bumping along dirt roads toward the ponds. Then I am waist-deep in water, telling myself that I am just another marshy creature in this wet expanse, and must move unthinkingly forward. I take my place in the blind—a platform hidden by tall dried grass—between Loretta and Merle. I worry earplugs into and out of my ears enough times to think I may need new ones.

The sky lightens and widens. Sheets of birds unfold above. From my right, I hear the first eerie squawks and guttural grunts and trills of Merle's duck calls. For ten minutes the other three shoot and I wait. And then it is my turn. I miss my first three. Merle looks at me in disapproval. "You are as green a duck hunter as I've ever seen. Why, you're as green as this dog," he says. The dog, who is on his first hunt, too, has already successfully retrieved six ducks.

My next shots are good. I shoot a smooth brown wigeon, so compact it fits into my palm, and then a drake mallard, elaborately beautiful, jade-headed, with pearly feathers around his neck.

I thank each duck and am happy no one laughs at me. Angelo and Charlie smoke; Loretta drinks coffee; Charlie lands the *crème du ciel*, a specklebelly goose, which contents everyone.

At what is called the cookhouse, Loretta tutors me in duck cleaning. I stand at a gruesome, square metal table with a hole in the middle, beneath which a 50-gallon barrel fits, and pick layers of feather and down from the warm birds, laying the finished ones side by side to be passed over a flame that singes off the last tiny pinfeathers. Charlie and Loretta pull out innards; Angelo singes. I rinse the birds under water.

Finally we are done, and I am glad to shower and change clothes and take a long tour by truck of the property. Those of us who are inclined (Charlie and me) drink local wine from a bottle, and Charlie shows us where salmon and shad run in the cold Sacramento. He points out the wild figs that line the dusty roads.

Today, with nearly all our food cultivated, few of us know precisely what wildness tastes like. Different species manifest it differently: Wild vegetables are often bitter, wild meat "gamey." We know what bitterness is, but gaminess is an adjective without a

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clear definition. This is both because it's tautological—*Merriam-Webster's* gives us “having the flavor of game”—and because, according to food-science writer Harold McGee, the flavor has not been much studied by the meat industry. This makes some practical sense; the pursuit would not be terribly profitable.

I have always tasted gaminess as strong, nutty, and seductively foreign. I long imagined the flavor must be of the same chemical lineage as the compelling flavors of aged meat. McGee tells me I am likely wrong. In the case of wild meat, flavors come from whatever happens during the animals' lives. In the case of aged meat, it comes from the lives of enzymes that set to work on it—whether it is wild or tame—after death.

It is the “what happens during animals' lives” that makes wild meat compelling. Most farm animals eat a controlled, uniform diet. They move and adventure little. What wild meat expresses, on the other hand, is something we look on approvingly: terroir.

Terroir, the taste of a thing's place of origin, does not pertain only to what grows on stems and vines. In *The Physiology of Taste*, published in 1825, at the pinnacle of game's popularity, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin explains that a partridge from Périgord cannot compare to one from Sologne, which would have feasted at the banks of the Loire, and while a wild hare from Parisian suburbs would be unworthy, “a young one born on the sunburned slopes of Valromey or the upper Dauphiné is perhaps the tastiest of all four-legged game.”

Yale's Paul Freedman says it was, in particular, the canvasback ducks of the mid-Atlantic that Americans prized for

similar reasons. “This is something people scarcely think about now, but it used to be the most important part of deciding what to eat: Animals taste of what they feed on. Canvasback ducks were best from the Potomac and Chesapeake because there, they dined on wild celery.”

As soon as it is time to cook, I relinquish my *Larousse* fantasies of drowning our ducks in whiskey and marmalade. The instant one holds a lean wild duck in hand, it is clear that the only fair thing to do is season it with salt and pepper, inside and out, and place it inside a very hot oven to cook for as little time as you can bear.

Loretta, whose restaurant Coco500 is always named one of San Francisco's best, takes charge of our birds. She seasons each heavily with salt into which Angelo has mixed wild fennel, black pepper, and other spices. She turns them first quickly in a hot pan, coated with a bit of fat, then puts each directly in a 500° oven for 20 minutes, or about half the time it takes to bake a potato.

We eat wild chanterelle ragù Loretta has made, with Angelo's pappardelle, then the breast of the specklebelly goose, which is like fine, aged sirloin, but grassier and more fragrant.

Then we eat slices of each kind of wild duck, the skin salted and crisp. It seems the very origin of a taste I know—like tasting a lemon for the first time after a lifetime of lemonade. And it is more. What we eat tastes of all the seeds and grasses and tiny bugs that pepper the land and shores along the Pacific Flyway. In particular, I find myself feeling that each bite carries with it the perfumes of the water and

vegetation of Llano Seco—which I fantasize are very like those of Brillat-Savarin's beloved Sologne. We eat simply and hugely, declaring the wigeon, over the last slices of its rich, sweet meat, our unexpected favorite.

I return to San Francisco the following day with one duck. It is my mallard, which, because I plan to cook it that night, I have the unfortunate task of needing to check at the Taj Campton Place, where I am staying. I am given a special tag from the kind bellhop that reads: WHOLE DUCK, RAW, IN A RED BAG.

That evening I take the duck to the Berkeley home of some loosely vegetarian friends. They assure me it is welcome, apparently believing that if a new hunter, like a cat, brings you a heartfelt, bloody offering, you must suspend objections and accept it. I do the dirty work of removing the duck's head on the back deck. I season the rest of the body and roast my duck in the style of Loretta, in a very hot oven, very briefly. I carve it and serve it. Though they have hedged their bets, eating spinach pie and kale salad and butternut-squash soup, those bold enough to taste the dark, winey meat declare it delicious.

The next day, having finally eaten something of the wild, I fly home and think, perhaps irrationally, that a duck's existence, feeding on wild rices and fruit on pristine marsh, seems a very good one. I also again consider the morality of hunting, and come to a feeling that having life ended, mid-flight, soaring in a wide arc through a clear morning wouldn't be such a bad way to go. Is that a macabre notion to entertain at 35,000 feet? It doesn't feel so. It feels exuberant. □

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americanapparel.com. **View 122:** Manicure, Gina Viviano for Chanel Beauté. **128:** Cropped jacket (\$2,145) and shirt-dress (\$2,390); jacket at Kirna Zabête, NYC, and shirtdress at Capitol, Charlotte, NC. Calfskin boots, \$450; select Saks Fifth Avenue stores. **132:** Delfina Delettrez jewelry, \$1,200–\$6,500; openingceremony.us. Dries Van Noten leather sandals, \$965; Saks Fifth Avenue stores. **138:** Chanel bracelets, \$1,425 each; select Chanel boutiques. Dries Van Noten leather sandals, \$1,070; select Barneys New York stores. **Style ethics 140:** From far left: 18K yellow gold—and-diamond Lantern ring, Southern Star ring, Symbol earrings, and

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