





Game *special*

Every bird is valuable, valued and eaten. That's the simple but brilliant message of the Game to Eat campaign, reports **Charlotte Reather**.

Photographs by **Lucinda Marland**

SOMETIMES we Brits forget what fabulous produce we have in this country. We have excellent-quality meats and Britain is one of the few places in the world where you can trace right back to the animal, the feed, the farmer, the pedigree, when the ear was clipped and the number tagged. It's as good as that. Unfortunately, we also love to fault everything British and, as a result, pay 20 times more for something that was bred in France," says chef Cyrus Todiwala at the Game to Eat dinner hosted in his award-winning London restaurant, Café Spice Namasté, last October.

Nine years ago this failure to enjoy our British produce was acutely apparent within the struggling game industry. We had completely overlooked one of the most delicious, healthy, free-range food sources available to us and were instead flogging it at knock-down prices to the Continent.

"When we started the Countryside Alliance's (CA) Game to Eat programme in 2000, the industry was on the brink of disaster. Dealers were threatening to stop picking up and supermarkets were concerned about quality," says Alexia Robinson, director and founder of Game to Eat.

However, thanks largely to the success of the campaign, the British game market is now one of the food industry's greatest success stories. Alexia says, "In 2001 I secured government funding of £150,000 from the Rural Enterprise Scheme. This was provided on a match-funding basis with the CA giving the other £150,000, enough for the Game to Eat project for the first three years."

It was described by DEFRA as "one of the most well-run national projects operating under the Rural Enterprise Scheme". Since then it has been funded entirely by the CA through membership donations and specific campaigns inviting the big shoots to contribute.

Alexia says: "A few shoots make an annual contribution, but sadly it is only a few. My view is that, long term, the campaign needs to be funded by a levy system similar to how the

English Beef & Lamb Executive is funded – though I would suggest the shoot levy should be voluntary and only applicable for the big shoots who are responsible for most of the supply, hence most dependent upon our marketing efforts to ensure balanced supply and demand."

MARKET WORTH £69 MILLION

Game to Eat's campaign has enabled game to enjoy a bigger resurgence than any other food. According to the latest Mintel market report, sales have increased 64 per cent since 2002 and retail sales were expected to rise by nearly eight per cent in 2008 to make the market worth £69 million. Within just five years, the market value for game has nearly doubled, outstripping sales of organic products.

Game's popularity is led by venison, which has three-fifths of the market share and is in constant demand, followed by pheasant and partridge, the major players in the gamebird sector. The latter have benefited from the amendments to the game laws meaning they can now be sold out of season and enjoyed all year round. Alexia says: "Game is more accessible than ever and customers are increasingly aware of its health benefits: pheasant and partridge are particularly high in protein and low in fat and cholesterol while venison is high in protein, low in fat, has fewer calories and higher iron levels than other meats."

What's more, the increased demand for game to eat is healthy news for shooting. Jonathan Young, Editor of *The Field*, says: "The profile for game is definitely improving thanks to Game to Eat. In one hour on prime-time television we saw Jamie Oliver shooting redlegs and Thomasina Miers in *The Wild Gourmets* shooting grouse. Killing things we eat, eating things we kill is easy for people to understand. They know that there is rank hypocrisy in eating meat and then condemning the killing of it. Of course some people say 'You shoot things for pleasure,' but isn't that why they eat a piece of fish or a burger? They could eat soya protein if they >

From the sky to the plate: once you've enjoyed shooting your pheasant (left) you can turn it into something equally pleasing such as pheasant sheek kebab (inset), served at the Game to Eat dinner in Café Spice Namasté

really wished.” Jim Paice, the Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Rural Affairs, says: “I’m a supporter of any campaign that encourages people to eat game. It’s about making people realise that it’s nice to eat, good for you and is a direct consequence of shooting. I get cross with people who treat game without the respect it deserves. Game-shooting is about killing something people can ultimately enjoy. The pleasure of the sport should not detract from the value of the bird or animal as a good end product. It’s a superb wild meat, and it is farmed and killed humanely.

“As the chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Shooting and Conservation, I hosted a game-tasting reception with MPs from all parties attending. Some who previously had had no interest in shooting or were anti it came and enjoyed the food. It was a significant development and we hope to repeat it with another reception this year.”

Alexia believes the battle with consumers and the media is far less about shooting, more a fear of the unknown: “It’s a struggle to get people to think of game as contemporary food and not head-scarf fodder! One great leap forward for our campaign was when we stopped photographing the fur or feather. It really helped.”

HUNTER GATHERERS

“It is vital to the future of the countryside that we reconnect the public and the food they are eating. Game plays an important role in doing just that. Man’s basic instinct as hunter-gatherer is to seek out food. In this modern world, the methods by which we procure our food have changed but essentially that motivation hasn’t. The desire to find sustainable food delivery systems is now one of the biggest issues facing mankind. Given that fact, I believe there’s never been a better time to encourage people to consume the natural produce from our countryside,” says Alexia.

Game to Eat has set about educating people on how to cook anything from woodcock to venison. Recipe booklets have been printed for consumers and game workshops are held up and down the country for chefs and caterers. Alexia says, “Chefs are major supporters of British and seasonal produce. Whether it is a Michelin-starred restaurant or a local village pub, there is always place for game on the menu. When consumers enjoy a game meal in a pub or restaurant it encourages them to visit their supermarket’s game fixture, make a purchase and cook a meal at home.”

I sampled the delights of the Game to Eat dinner with Cyrus’s Indian twist. With wines matched skilfully by Florent Thibaut from the world-famous Rioja producer, Marqués de Cáceres, I enjoyed an array of dishes including slow-cooked venison with spices, rissoles of grouse and pheasant kebab. Cyrus says: “Some people might think game, wine and Indian food wouldn’t work but they are a match made in heaven. Don’t forget, in India we have grouse, quail and venison. And wine suits Indian food well – they were making wine in Asia way before the Europeans!”

Another chef backing the Game to Eat campaign is Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who says: “Game is a top-quality

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The food prepared by chef Cyrus Todiwala (top) is tasted (above right) and enjoyed with wine (above). Dishes included venison kheema hawa mahal with til tinka aloo and dahi bhaat (right)



food: healthy, free-range and good value, especially when in season. It’s now readily available in supermarkets and butchers, so there’s no excuse not to try it. Start with pheasant breasts and go from there. A big thumbs up to Game to Eat for promoting game to consumers and retailers alike.”

Celebrity chef Phil Vickery has teamed up with Game to Eat to produce six short recipe films which can be viewed on the website (www.gametoeat.co.uk). *Ready, Steady, Cook* chef Ross Burden is also supporting the campaign: “Working with game is always a joy, but demonstrating it, especially to people unfamiliar with furred and feathered food, is incredibly rewarding. I try to use world cuisines to underline the versatility of the products. For example, dishes such as stir-fried venison loin with tangerine peel or spatchcock partridge with Moroccan spices make the consumer think again about the image of game and realise the broadness of its appeal,” he says. Alexia notes the importance of good endorsement, “With celebrity chefs backing us and extensive



Grouse rissole canapés are met with smiles (above left). The pudding, suntra aur saunf ka khaman: a part-steamed, part-baked gateau with tangerine and fennel served with light sago kheer and an apple and ginger preserve (above). Grey-legged partridge tittar mussalum was served as the first course (left)

“Game to Eat has been one of those joyous campaigns where everything we have tried has worked” says Alexia. “However, in its early days one of the biggest battles was to get shoots to stop obsessing about the price of game.” Shoots were up in arms that pheasant was almost worthless at around 48p a brace in 2001, with some shoots not receiving any payment at all.

“I worked closely with the National Gamekeepers’ Organisation to get shoots to understand that the price was irrelevant and that their energies should be redirected into making sure that they had a high-quality market product. They needed to see their birds less as flying targets, more as something entering the food chain. The next stage was to build good relationships with game dealers or market their product locally to make more money.”

WILD, NATURAL, FREE-RANGE

As shoots’ attitudes changed, the price of the game began to rise and, in 2006, it was 40 per cent higher than when the campaign started. Through Game to Eat, the game industry had begun to get its act together and, with educational support from the Countryside Alliance, game producers started to meet food trade regulations, construct game larders and refrigerating facilities and learn how to market their meat effectively. In 2008 Game to Eat surveyed 5,411 shoots and there wasn’t a single shoot that had reported any difficulties in finding a market for game. In addition, 90 per cent of shoots felt that the market was as strong if not stronger than it had been five years previously. It was a notable victory for Alexia and her team.

In 2005 Game to Eat achieved another key win on behalf of the game industry. The Countryside Alliance successfully defended the right to describe game meat as “wild, natural and free-range” against a complaint by the League Against Cruel Sports to the Advertising Standards Authority. The campaign’s ability to overcome obstacles while still maintaining a high-speed momentum is inspiring and, fortunately, there is no hint of slowing down. Thanks to Game to Eat, British game will keep flying out of the supermarkets and jumping off our plates for the foreseeable future. With such determined custodians of the industry as Alexia on their side, it is doubtful that we will ever lose our game to the French and Germans again. ■

media coverage, game is now very ‘of the moment’. The goal, therefore, is to ensure that it is not a passing fad. The fact that sales have been sustained year-on-year suggests it’s not, but as an industry we still lag behind other food sectors in terms of providing a robust supply of quality products and our investment in marketing is a fraction of what is spent on beef or lamb, for example. Simply put, we cannot afford to take our position on the supermarket shelves for granted.”

Thanks to Alexia’s unwillingness to sit back, between 2003 and 2007 game sales through supermarkets increased by a whopping 150 per cent. Many chains are now expanding their range of wild game in the chiller with mallard, pheasant, partridge and venison all being available this season. And in November last year, Tesco, Sainsbury’s and Waitrose ran in-store tasting sessions of pan-fried pheasant breast served with a yoghurt and mint dip. The aim was to show how easy pheasant is to cook, that it tastes great and that it is a healthy option.

FIVE GAME TO EAT PHEASANT RECIPES

- Pot-roasted pheasant with cider, apples and celeriac
 - Tandoori pheasant
 - Warm pheasant salad with mushroom dressing
 - Pheasant with roast pepper pappardelle
 - Red pheasant curry (pictured)
- All five recipes can be found on *The Field* website, www.thefield.co.uk.
For more information on Game to Eat visit www.gametoat.co.uk.

