FROM FIELD TO FORK:

How Time Spent in the Kitchen Inspired Me to Hunt

by Jack Pollner
I guess you could say I had some sort of an introduction to hunting when I was young, but it was a far cry from some of the stories I have heard about traipsing through marshes with grandfathers after ducks, hanging tree stands in anticipation of pulling the trigger on a great buck, or 3:00 a.m. wake-ups to creep in on spring turkeys. No, instead of exploits like those, I was raised by a father who had lived as an avid hunter in a past life. I hold nothing against him; as a new father myself, I have come to know firsthand the maelstrom of activities that can pull a parent away from time outdoors.

My first exposure to hunting was limited to finding old photos of my dad pheasant hunting and hearing stories of hunts he had been on when he worked at a large sporting goods shop in northern New Jersey. At some point in my childhood, my uncle got into trap shooting.

I remember my father digging an old clay pigeon thrower out of the basement and retrieving his shotgun from a closet. The four of us, my father, my uncle, my cousin, and I, all headed out to the cornfield behind our house to shoot clays. Well, mostly my father and uncle shot clays. The late 1970s Belgian-made Browning autoloader that my father owned, while artfully crafted, was far too heavy to be wielded effectively by my 5-year-old frame. It was a memory that has stuck with me though, even to this day.

One thing I did inherit from my father is a passion for food and cooking. You see, I come from a family of cooks. My parents owned an Italian restaurant. My uncle owned an Italian restaurant. My “zio Franco” owned an Italian restaurant. I remember hanging out in the booths as a young child while my parents went about their prep work. On days when my family got together, cooking was an all-day affair. The kitchen was the gathering place where all the important decisions were made. I saw that food was something that went much deeper than just sustenance. My cooking became a tool that I used to bring friends together. The pasta and chicken dishes of my Italian upbringing were staples that I never forfeited, but I longed for ingredients that were fresh and unfamiliar to me.
Fast forward to adulthood. When I was 30 years old, a fishing buddy of mine came over for a barbecue and brought a package of venison steaks. Onto the grill they went, and I cooked them well past what should be considered “done”—or edible. But here was an ingredient that I had never had the chance to play with, and it arrived on my plate at a time when I was taking a good look at the foods I was eating. My wife and I had just purchased 10 acres with the intention of developing a homestead where we would grow as much of our own food as possible. Call it the locavore movement or modern homesteading, but whatever the name my wife and I both wanted to have a deeper connection to our food, whether it was knowing the farmer who raised it or growing and harvesting it ourselves.

I had taken the New Hampshire Hunter Education course the year before and had completed my field day, but hadn’t yet purchased a hunting license. To be honest, I had no idea where to start, and the thought of blasting off into the woods with a rifle slung over my shoulder wasn’t so much an intimidating notion, but there just had to be more to it. Every video I’d watched on YouTube and every hunting show I had DVR’d made hunting look so easy, like the host had been born with an innate knowledge of what to do. How could a kid from Jersey roll into the woods of New Hampshire and be successful?

The following spring, the same friend who brought over the venison steaks offered to take me out for spring gobbler season. I purchased my hunting license, bought some camo, and patterned my shotgun, a Mossberg 930 I’d purchased more for home defense and general utility than hunting. With a turkey choke installed, and the proper ammunition, it all grouped well enough so that if I did my part, it could masquerade as a turkey gun.

When opening day arrived, we got into the woods early, set up, and were almost immediately rocked by a gobble in a tree just 20 yards behind us. The bird we had roosted the night before had moved, and once he flew down he might as well have been in Timbuktu. After that morning, I spent a few days out on my own, and saw a few birds here and there, but none were fooled by my attempts to lure them in. That first season, I left the fields with my head down, dejected. I felt like I had all the pieces to a puzzle, but was missing the box with the instructions that showed me how they went together. The following deer firearm season was equally as unfruitful, though the effort I put forth was hardly worthy of a harvest.

With two different game seasons down and nothing to show for it, I figured I might as well give up the idea of hunting as a viable source of protein for the household. It felt as if I hadn’t been born to hunt. Maybe I just didn’t have the chops for it. I recalled a phrase I had heard in the past that went something like, “Not all the Indians were hunters; some had to carry firewood.”

As the winter wore on, I prepared myself for a second wild turkey season. One morning I happened to see a message in my inbox from Josh Mackay, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department’s Hunter Education Coordinator. He invited

"... a tom responded from his roost in earnest. I heard the drum of his wings as he flew down, and all went silent."
The fastest way to identify a male turkey is by its “beard,” a collection of course feathers growing from the center of its breast.

me to attend a Mentored Turkey Hunting Program that was being conducted in partnership with the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF). The course was structured in two parts. The first component was a day-long intensive classroom experience focused on the basics of hunting wild turkey. The second part was going out into the field with a hunting mentor. Not wanting to constantly badger my buddies to take me out so that I could fail, I signed up. The prospect of going on a hunt with someone who was prepared to motivate a total greenhorn appealed to me.

The classroom event was a great experience. We learned how to scout for turkeys in the pre-season, how and when to call—including a crash course in the use of various calls—and some general rules and regulations for turkey season. We also spent some time at the local shooting range patterning our shotguns and testing them with different types of ammo. Each person brought a box of turkey ammunition and we swapped shells, which allowed us to try various loads without having to spend a ton of money on multiple boxes.

Even more helpful than the class was my day out with my mentor. We had agreed to hunt on a tract of his land on which he had scouted some birds. We walked in early and set up behind a rock wall near a convergence of old logging trails. As the sun rose, my mentor made a few soft yelps on his box call, and a tom responded from his roost in earnest. I heard the drum of his wings as he flew down, and all went silent. The tom ended up about 10 feet away from us on the other side of the wall, too close for comfort. He hung around for what felt like an eternity before he walked away. I popped up and over the wall, just in time to see him dash behind a pine tree and into a thicket. I squeezed off a shot, but either in my haste to aim or because of the dense pine boughs between us, not enough of my pellets went where they needed to be. He ran off and sounded a loud warning call, as if to rub my error in my face.

Contrary to what you might expect, that failure existed as a smaller part of what was a huge learning experience for me. Having a mentor who took me out to show me the mechanics of a turkey hunt did more for my confidence and knowledge than any YouTube video could have. I learned how to take what I had experienced and implement it to become a successful hunter.

A few days later, I set up in a field where I had seen birds frequently during my scouting missions. I knew where they roosted, where they spent their first few hours in the morning, and that they would eventually move into the field in which I would hunt. I placed hen and jake decoys about 30 yards away from my vantage point,
sat down, and waited. At about 9:30 a.m., I watched three hens and three toms enter the field across from my position. They slowly worked their way toward me over the next half hour. The flock came in from a spot where a small rise in the field obstructed their view of my decoys, but I was still visible. After what felt like hours, one of the hens moved to a spot where she could see my decoy, and she ran over to check out the new lady in town. The toms followed, and I picked one out, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. That tom was my first hunting success and the beginning of a new journey for me.

That day provided me with my first wild meat, which I turned into a batch of Sheboygan brats, the recipe courtesy of famous wild game chef Hank Shaw. Eating meat that I raised myself is one thing, but there is something even more special about putting a meal on the table that I hunted myself. Perhaps it’s a primitive reflex, but the elation after a successful hunt is one of the best feelings I’ve ever experienced. Since that first tom, I’ve been fortunate enough to harvest a deer with my bow and a second tom last season. My wife encourages me to spend more time scouting in the summer. It turns out that she’s quite a fan of backstrap fried in butter.

What I’ve found equally as rewarding about this new pastime though has been bringing others into the field and into the fold. My best friend, a chef, recently approached me about learning to hunt, for much the same reasons I first decided to pursue wild game. He’d seen my posts on social media of meals that I prepared from animals I’d harvested and we had shared a few wild game meals together. He attended Hunter Education and bought his hunting license, so last spring we set out to get him a tom. There were a few cold and rainy days in the blind, and ultimately our time together proved fruitless. But on the last day we hunted together, we happened to drive by a recently harvested timber lot—with three toms cruising through it. He made a note to return the next morning alone and practice the techniques I was able to pass along.

Well wouldn’t you know it. He called me the next day asking for that bratwurst recipe. And just like me, he’s been hooked ever since.

Now a hunter too, Jack Pollner is also a small-scale farmer, fisherman, and jaded ski bum. He lives in Greenfield, NH, with his wife Jackie and daughter Emma, whom he hopes will be a better hunter than firewood carrier one day.

Top: The opening of spring gobbler season is a morning many hunters look forward to all year, and one that required a great deal of preparation.

Middle: A successful turkey harvest requires patience, careful scouting, and a good call.

Bottom: Respect for any animal is conveyed through the methodical processing of the harvest.
Sheboygan Bratwurst
From a recipe courtesy of Hank Shaw

**Ingredients**
- 3 pounds turkey, pork or veal
- 1 pound pork belly or fatty shoulder
- 25 grams kosher salt
- 2 grams black pepper, about a teaspoon
- 1 gram dried marjoram, about a teaspoon
- 5 grams ground ginger, about 1 1/2 teaspoons
- 2 grams freshly ground nutmeg, about 1 teaspoon
- 50 grams dry milk
- 3 grams caraway, about a teaspoon
- 2 grams mustard seed, about a teaspoon
- 1 egg white
- 1/2 cup heavy cream
- Hog casings

**Instructions**
1. Soak 10 feet of hog casings in warm water.
2. Cut turkey meat and fat into chunks to fit into a meat grinder. Combine the salt, pepper, marjoram, ginger, and nutmeg, then mix with the meat and fat until covered. Refrigerate overnight, but marinate mixture for at least an hour to develop myosin which texturizes the finished sausage. Right before grinding, place the meat in the freezer until it is between 30°F and 40°F. Also place your grinder parts (auger, dies, blades, etc.) in the freezer and chill a bowl in the refrigerator.
3. Grind one-third of the mixture through the coarse die, and the rest through the fine die to create an interesting texture. If the meat mixture is still at 35°F or below, binding can begin immediately.
4. After returning the mixture to 35°F, add the dry milk, caraway, mustard seed, egg white and heavy cream. Mix well with your (very clean) hands for 2 to 3 minutes; because of the low temperature most hands ache during this process. Mix until the meat binds to itself.
5. To form links, put the loose sausage into a stuffer and thread a casing onto it. Stuffing sausage is faster and more fun with two people—one to fill the links, the other to coil—but it can easily be done solo. Stuff the links well but not super-tight to be sure you can tie them off later. Stuff the entire casing; I leave at least three inches of unstuffed casing on either end of the coil.
6. To form individual links, tie off one end of the coil. Pinch off two links about six inches long, then rotate the link between your palms a few times. To remove air pockets, pierce the casing on the pockets using a sterilized needle or sausage pricker. Twist the links a little and gently compress them until they are tight. Repeat this process with the rest of the sausage.
7. Poach the links to set the sausage by bringing a large pot of water to 160°F. Gently poach the sausage in the steaming water for 20-30 minutes. Once poached, remove the sausages and plunge them into a bowl of ice water to stop the cooking process.
8. Hang your links for an hour or so to dry. Once you’ve taken the links down, they can be refrigerated for up to a week, or frozen for up to a year.
New Hampshire Wildlife Journal is your best source for fishing, hunting, wildlife and conservation information in the state.

DID YOU ENJOY READING THIS ARTICLE?

Every issue of N.H. Wildlife Journal includes stunning wildlife photography, in-depth features and "how-to" articles – plus Naturalist's Notebook, Warden's Watch and no advertising.

So what are you waiting for? Subscribe today!

www.wildnh.com/pubs/wj-magazine.html