

OF KEEPERS AND KINGS

IN THE history of the Highland deer-forest, the destruction of game and its consumptions with orgiastic relish march hand in zealous hand, whether outdoors or in, whether at morning, noon or night.

Lindsay of Pitscottie's account of hunting in Glen Tilt includes a description of the lavish hospitality provided in 1528 by the Earl of Atholl for his guests, King James V, the king's mother and an ambassador of the Pope.

'The earl made such provision for the king and his mother and the ambassador, that they had all manner of meats, drinks and delicacies that were to be gotten at that time in all Scotland, either in town or in country. That is to say, all kind of drink, such as ale, beer, wine, both white and claret, madeira, sweet muscatel, spiced hippocras, and strong spirits. Further, there were all types of breads and meats: beef, mutton, lamb, veal, venison, sucking pigs, chicken and rabbits; along with goose, heron, swan, partridge, plover, duck, drake, turkey, peacock, black-cock, grouse, and capercaille. The surrounding ponds were full of delicious fishes, such as salmon, trout, perch, pike, eel, and the other sorts of fish to be had in fresh water: and all ready for the banquet. There were also special stewards, skilled bakers, cooks and chefs, with cakes and sweets for their desserts'.

And in 1618 the Earl of Marr took a distinguished (and vast) party on a shooting expedition, in the company of John Taylor. Taylor later recalled:

'The kitchen was always on the side of a bank, many kettles and pots boiling, and many spits turning and winding, with great variety of cheer, such as venison, baked, boiled, or roast; and

stewed beef, mutton, goats, kids, hares, fresh salmon, pigeons, hens, capons, chickens, partridges, cootes, heath-cocks, capercailles, and ptarmigans; good ale, sherry, white wine, claret, sweet red tent, and most potent spirits. Thus a company of about 1400 was most amply fed'.

By the time that Victoria and her 'dear, dear' Prince Albert had established themselves at Balmoral, however, shooting-party dishes were French in style, and as a natural consequence were much more civilised (though oddly non-alcoholic). For luncheon, Albert and his guests would typically enjoy the following sort of menu, sent out to them at their sport:

Homard naturel, sauce rémoulade

Ragoût de mouton provençal

Poulet et langue à l'Anglaise

Salade Vosigienne

Epinards au beurre

Pommes de terre maître d'hôtel

Tarte aux framboises et groseilles

Compote de pêches

English cuisine was not, of course, overlooked, and on this occasion was nobly represented by what is described as pouding au riz and, finally, apple dumpling - clearly a concept that the gracious subtleties of the French language were unable to encompass.

Naturally, this luncheon was for the dozen or so 'rifles' only. The retainers - beaters, stalkers, pony-men and the rest - ate more modestly.

Breakfast too, in a Victorian shooting-lodge, was a sturdy affair. Writing in 1889 in his *Outdoor Sports in Scotland*, J. G. Bertram recalls with lusty precision one such meal: one can only regret the absence of a companion volume on Scottish indoor sports - overeating evidently among them.

‘Happily, I started with the best of all foundations, a capital breakfast. Attend and envy me: item first, a steak of broiled salmon; item second, a helping from a pie composed of jellied sheep’s head nicely seasoned and palatable; item third, a savoury omelet piping-hot; item fourth, one half of a rizzard haddock; add to these home-baked bread in the form of scones and oatcakes, as well as honey, marmalade at discretion, plenty of cream and real good coffee, and you will give me credit for having breakfasted. There was a dram afterwards, but that is never counted, although the whisky is well disguised in several tablespoons of heather honey. We started for the seat of war about seven o’clock, mounted on ponies’.

But these - breakfast and luncheon - were mere playthings, timid introductions to the manlier pleasures of the after-the-stalk dining-room: and there is no better to introduce them than the mighty Isabella Beeton herself.

This, after all, was Britain at the height of her colonial power, in the balmy days of that great, never-ending imperial summer which would introduce, in its time, Great War. The national cuisine had moved far from its fourteenth-century delights of sucking rabbit, venison pasty, and roast teal, quail and snipe.

Certainly, luncheon remained an important ritual in the stalking day, but the food was much more modern. Had stress of weather detained a party from going to the hill, for instance, they might lunch in-lodge and could expect to find on the table:

Fillets of sole in mayonaise
Iced lobster soufflé
Braised beef with savoury jelly
Dressed ox-tongue
Fillets of duckling with goose liver farci
Braised stuffed quails
Roast pheasant in crust
Japanese salad
Border of rice with stewed prunes
Cakes, savouries, cheese, and dessert.

A Beeton lunch-box - adequate if not specifically for the hill - was no less ambitious. At 1909 prices, a party of 20 could enjoy at a total cost of just under £3 the following:

Four lobsters
Ten pounds of beef wing rib
Four roast chickens
One small ham
Two chaud-froid of chicken
One veal and ham pie
Salad and dressing
Two fruit tarts
Cream and two jellies
Four loaves, two pounds of biscuits
One and a half pounds of cheese
Half a pound of butter
And a dozen each of pears, bananas and apples.

Retainers and servants would naturally also bring to the mountain appropriate ancillary equipment in the form of wines, mineral waters, lemon juice, plates, dishes, knives, forks, spoons, glasses, tableclothes, napkins, glass-clothes, corkscrews, champagne-openers, castor sugar, oil, vinegar, pepper, cayenne, salt and pickles.

But still - such luncheons were no match for the rigours of a long day, and it was to the lodge dining-room that the stalkers would direct their attention on their return from the hill.

Naturally enough, dishes of game of both the flying and walking kinds figured prominently, and Mrs Beeton offers an unmatched illustration of what might be on offer and of how it might have been cooked. Some of the dishes are perhaps overly sturdy for modern sensibilities, such as black cock, capercaille, corncrake, bunting, plover and ptarmigan - along with the singularly unsporting dishes of *pâte de merle* and *grive rôtie*.

But it is with the more usual classes of gamebirds, along with venison and salmon, that Mrs Beeton is primarily concerned. And though she can manage just two recipes for grouse, and only nine for venison, she includes no fewer than twenty-four for salmon.

For roasted grouse ('its flesh is of an exquisite flavour') the cook required two birds, two slices of toast, butter, good brown gravy, bread sauce, fried breadcrumbs and bacon.

'Let the birds hang in a cool, dry place for three or four days. When ready for use, pluck, draw and truss them in the same manner as roast chicken. Tie over each breast a thin slice of bacon, and roast before a clear fire from thirty to thirty-five minutes, basting frequently with butter. When nearly done, remove the bacon,

dredge with flour, and baste well to give the birds a nice brown appearance. Toast the bread lightly and, when the birds are about three-quarters cooked, put it into the dripping-tin to catch the gravy that drops from them. Dish on the toast, and serve the gravy, bread sauce and breadcrumbs separately'. Cost (of grouse): 20p the brace.

For one of her venison dishes (a modest one by her standards) the required ingredients are one pound of venison, the juice of three small onions, an egg, an ounce of butter, parsley, flour, nutmeg and seasoning.

'Pound the peeled, sliced and blached onions in a mortar until reduced to a pulp, place this in muslin, and press out the juice with the back of a wooden spoon. Remove all skin, fat and gristle from the meat, chop it finely, and mix with it the onion juice, parsley and a pinch of nutmeg. Stir in the egg, season to taste, form into flat cakes the size and shape of a fillet, and coat them lightly with flour. Heat the butter in a chafing-dish, put in the steaks and fry gently for ten minutes, turning them once. Place the cover on the chafing-dish, continue to cook gently for five minutes longer, then serve'.

Serves 3 or 4. Cost: 10p.

But it is when Mrs Beeton comes to fish that the full style - or flavour - of the contemporary kitchen becomes apparent. For Paupiettes of Salmon Régence Style, the ingredients are listed as two and a half pounds of salmon, one large whiting, three ounces of panada, two ounces of butter, two egg yolks, a spoonful of Béchamel sauce, seasoning, a teaspoon of parsley, preserved mushroom heads for garnish and Régence sauce.

'Remove the fillets from the bone, cut off the skin, divide each fillet in half lengthwise, and cut them into rather thin long slices of

even size, trimming them neatly. Skin and bone the whiting, pound it in a mortar until smooth, add the panada, mix well, then add the egg yolks, about one ounce of butter, the Béchamel sauce and the chopped parsley. Season to taste with salt, pepper, cayenne and nutmeg, and rub through a fine sieve. Spread each slice of salmon with a layer of this farci or forcemeat, roll up into paupiette shapes, and tie each with string or skewer them together in twos or threes. Place them in the sauté-pan containing one ounce of melted butter, divide the remainder of the butter into little bits, placing these on top of the paupiettes, cover with a butter paper, and cook in a moderate oven from twenty to twenty-five minutes, basting frequently. When done, take up, remove the skewers or string, and dress the paupiettes on a hot dish. Have the Régence sauce nicely heated, add the mushroom heads, allowing one large head for each paupiette; place the mushrooms on the paupiettes, and serve hot'. Serves 10. Cost - 25p to 30p.

But such dishes were the stuff of lodge, mansion and castle; they were not, it may be asserted with confidence, the everyday fare of the labouring masses, urban or rural, Scottish or English.

Still, in the Highlands, where the common people claimed access by right of history and culture, if not by alien law, to the produce of moor, mountain and river, game was no stranger to the popular table. The Highlands had their own traditions of popular hunting, which were of somewhat greater antiquity - dignity, indeed - than those of the recreational hunting class.

Poacher's broth, for instance, was as formidable as anything that might appear on the shooting-lodge table (and if it were a lot simpler to cook, its ingredients would not have been quite so easy to catch). In Margaret (Meg) Dods's brisk description, 'this savoury

and highly relishing stew-soup may be made of anything or everything known to the name of game': and she does not exaggerate.

In her recipe, two to four pounds of venison, a whole blackcock, a pheasant entire, a hare (just a half) and a brace of grouse are boiled with whatever spices and vegetables are to hand: the lot, should resources permit, and then optionally, coloured with red wine. 'Let the soup simmer until the game is tender, but not overdone; and, lest it should, the vegetables may be put in half an hour before the meat'.

Slightly more than a century later, Marian McNeill's grouse soup was almost as robust and not much more complicated, requiring 'two old birds', celery, peppercorns, juniper berries (optional), salt, cayenne pepper, butter, oatmeal, beef stock, port or red wine, and whisky or cream.

Her salmon soup is equally simple, requiring the trimmings of a fish, the bones of one or two whittings ('these make all the difference'), carrot, turnip, onion, celery, parsley, breadcrumbs and mashed potatoes.

And when it comes to salmon as a main course, McNeill and Dods ('nothing is more disgusting and unwholesome than underdone fish') are in agreement on two things: it need not of necessity be fresh, but it should be cooked simply.

Says Dods, 'where the fish is not fresh, and served in what is esteemed by some as the greatest perfection, crisp, curdy and creamy', it should be presented with no more than the water in which it is boiled, as sauce. And, she adds, 'Mustard is considered an improvement to salmon when overripe - beginning to spoil, in short; the fish may then be boiled with horse-radish'.

Meanwhile, McNeill's Tweed Kettle contrasts markedly with Beeton's idea of salmon, requiring one (fresh) fish, a handful of spices and vinegar.

'Cut a pound of fresh salmon, freed from skin and bone, into one-inch cubes. Season with salt, pepper and a tiny pinch of mace, and place in a fish kettle or saucepan with a minced shallot or a tablespoonful of chopped chives. Add half a cup of water and a quarter cup of wine vinegar or white wine, bring to the boil and simmer very gently for about thirty-five minutes. Add a tablespoonful of chopped parsley shortly before dishing up'.

McNeill's *The Scots Kitchen* is a great work of social history: elegant, funny, passionate and profoundly informed by turn. In it, she includes as exceedingly simple way of cooking venison, given her by the daughter of a Highland gamekeeper. No more in the way of ingredients are needed than venison, salt and pepper, flour and bacon fat or beef dripping. The diced meat is dipped in seasoned flour, cooked in two inches of fat until done, and served with flour-thickened gravy.

On this dish she says, 'This is perhaps the simplest and (say the gillies) certainly the best way of cooking venison, as it completely counteracts the natural dryness of the meat. One or two sliced onions may be browned in the fat before the venison is put in. One or two chopped rashers of bacon may be added. A few chestnuts, peeled and scraped, may be cooked with the meat'.

She concludes drily, 'And the laird adds a glass of port wine'.

And today food remains an important part of the deer-stalking and grouse-shooting scene.

Yvonne Learmonth, who cooks for Glen Tilt shooting parties at Forest Lodge, offers a plain but very traditional breakfast of porridge

- but recognises that the plainest of foods are often the most difficult to cook well and require the finest of ingredients.

For breakfast she offers the guests porridge made with oatmeal from the Mill at Alford in Aberdeenshire, and which she considers to be the best meal in Scotland. Bacon is home-cured, from an exceptionally good butcher in Pitlochry, while the eggs are always free-range. Toast is made on the Forest Lodge Aga (the best toast there is, she says) and served with various types of home-made marmalade.

A shooting-lunch could consist of flasks of soup, various filled rolls and a whole cooked ham on the bone, the lot washed down with a generous draught of sloe gin.

Dinner, however, offers a lighter touch than in days gone by. It might open with a starter of fan-cut avocado served with spinach and garlic mayonnaise and garnished with prawns and a whole langoustine, followed by a soup such as bortsch.

The main course reverts to tradition, and would most likely be of a roast haunch of venison, cooked according to its quality and type. It would be served with redcurrant and rowan jelly; dauphinoise potatoes; roast parsnips; red cabbage with apple; and a gravy flavoured with a little port and redcurrant jelly.

And the sweet - cranachan - is traditional. As she says, 'Mix a quantity of whipped double-cream with half that quantity of cream cheese, and add enough runny honey to sweeten it. Scatter some toasted pinhead oatmeal over the lot, and mix again. Add some whisky and Drambuie, whip, and stiffen the mixture in the fridge. Serve in individual glasses, on a bed of fresh raspberries, which must not be sweetened, and garnished with thin slices of home-made shortbread'.

And for wine? To taste, she says, but adds, 'Any burgandy or claret goes well with venison: the real secret, for wine or venison, is always to have the best possible quality'.

For: Gamekeeper - A Year in the Glen.

BREAKOUT PANELS

My father was a good hand at breakfast, being especially fond of smoked salmon and venison collops at which none allive could match his cook.

Osgood Mackenzie, A Hundred Years in the Highlands.

A Lady Perth of olden times met a Frenchman who disparaged Scottish cooking. 'Weel, weel', observed her ladyship with vernacular asperity, 'some fowk like parritch, and some fowk like puddocks'.

Dean Ramsay, Reminiscences of Scottish Life and Character

Margaret (Meg) Dods, one of the great Scottish cookery writers, was the pseudonym of Mrs Christian Johnston. To her culinary talent she added that of wit. On one occasion she visited the poet James Hogg, who escorted her to the the local Fairy Well and handed her a glass of its water with the comment, 'Mrs Johnston, any married woman who drinks a tumbler of this will have twins within the year'.

Mrs Johnston promptly replied, 'In that case, Mr Hogg, I shall only take half a tumbler'.

Sir Walter Scott, Journal.

The Edwardian period was not afraid to proclaim its status distinctions. One whisky producer advertised ten-year-old malt Lagavulin Selected at 120p the gallon. The younger blend of Old Highland, however, at just 90p the gallon, was advertised as 'suitable for gillies and beaters.

Salmon was once so plentiful that the Highland upper classes thought it a foodstuff most suitable for servants. In his Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland (1754), Burt tells of a chieftain and his retainer dining in a London tavern. Of the beef he ordered a steak for himself but, 'let Duncan have some salmon'. To be short, the Master's eating was eight pence, and Duncan's came to almost as many shillings.

Game, to keep from tainting. In cold, frost weather game may be hung from two to three weeks in an ordinary larder without becoming tainted, but when the atmosphere is warm and damp great care should be taken to hang it in a well-ventilated place, preferably where there is a current of air. The feathers are a great protection from flies, but it is advisable to apply a good sprinkling of pepper, which usually serves to keep away these pests.

Mrs Beeton, Household Management

A deer would be killed and the venison would be hung up in the spray of a great waterfall which entirely preserved any blue flies getting at it.

Osgood Mackenzie, A Hundred Years in the Highlands.