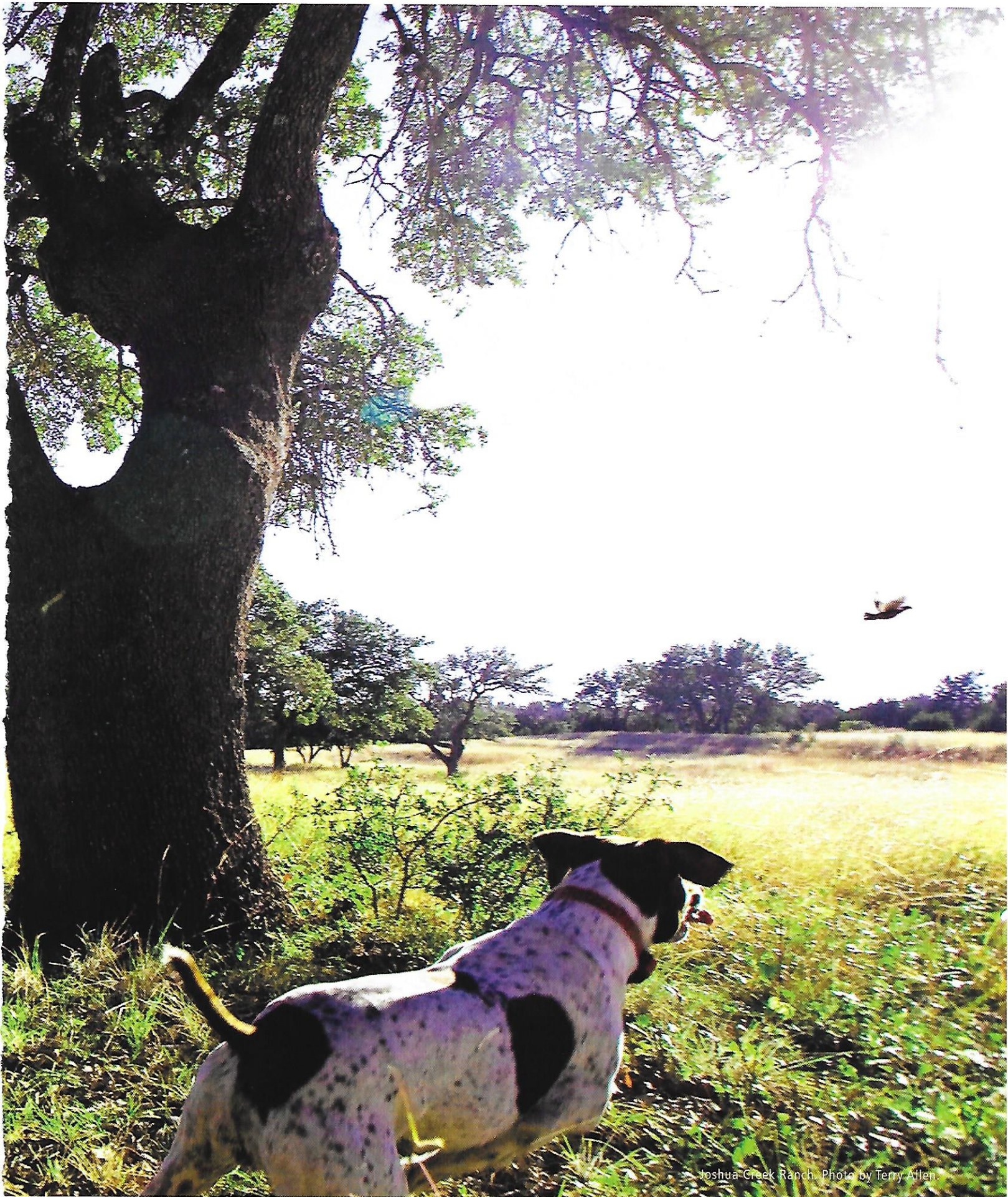


WILD ABOUT



GAME

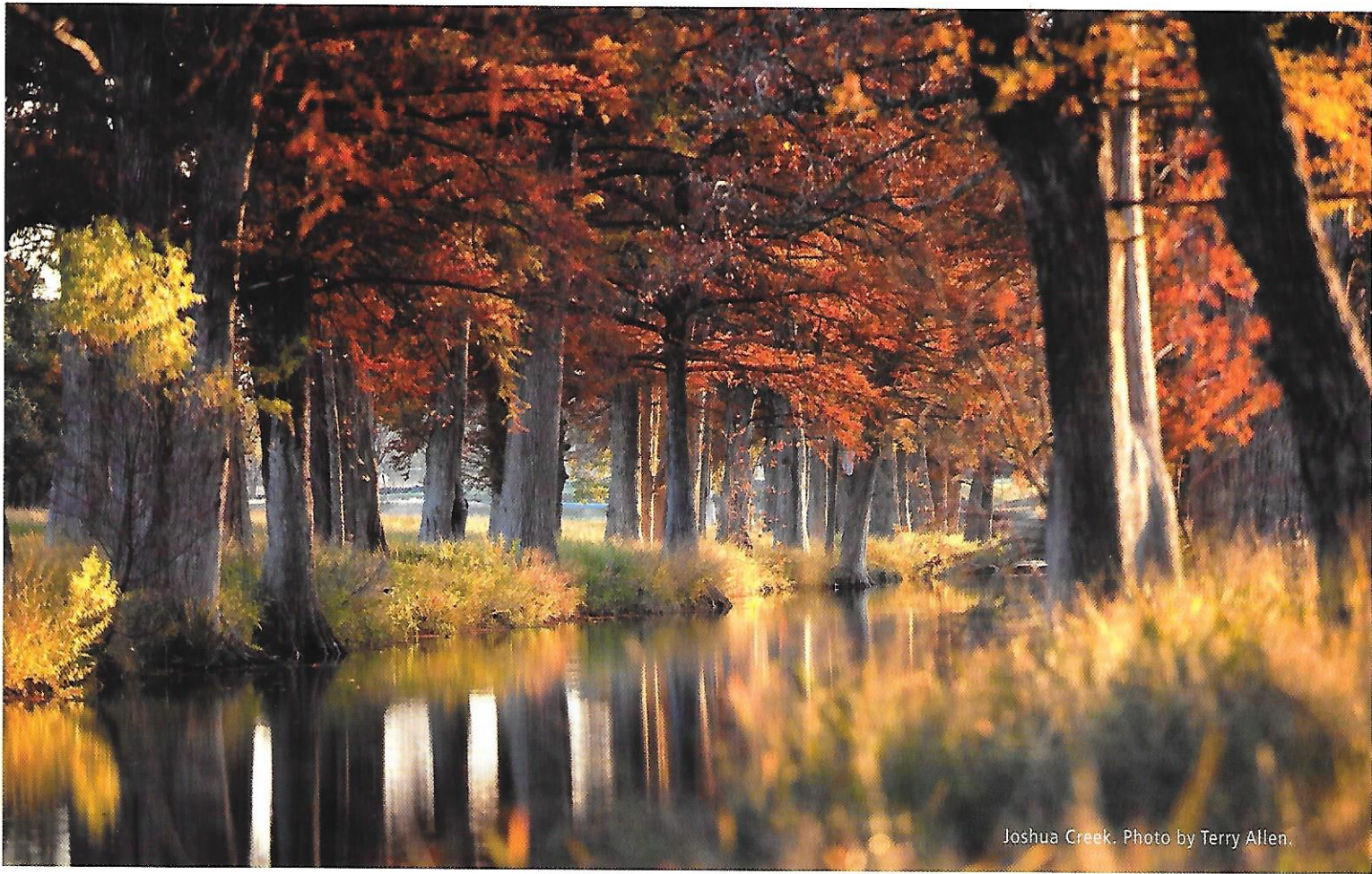
BY MICHELE MCMURRY



Joshua Creek Ranch. Photo by Terry Allen.



Georgia Pellegrini on a pheasant hunt at Joshua Creek Ranch. Photo by Terry Allen.



On a sunny fall morning at Joshua Creek Ranch, Georgia Pellegrini sets out on a hunt for the day's lunch. This is one of several stops for the celebrity huntress-chef-author, as part of a cross-country tour to haute hunting lodges that have been awarded the prestigious Beretta Trident designation for excellence.

In 2010, the 500-year-old Italian gun manufacturer launched the first system to rate shooting sports venues, evaluating them on site conditions, cuisine, lodging and service. Joshua Creek Ranch is one of four charter U.S. destinations and the only in Texas to receive the Beretta Trident Lodge designation in upland bird hunting.

"You put together your date and guest list, and we'll do the rest," says Ann Kercheville, who runs Joshua Creek Ranch with her husband, Joe Kercheville. The full-service hunting retreat has practiced sustainability for 20 years on 1,200 scenic acres outside Boerne. Professional guides ensure a bountiful harvest of quail, pheasant and chukar, which flourish in this Hill Country habitat from October to March. You can also hunt axis deer year-round on the property. At the end of the day, guests enjoy appetizers, either by the smoke pit or on the couple's private patio, before feasting on wild game creations at the lodge and retiring to luxurious bungalows.

It was in this tranquil paradise, near glistening Joshua Creek, where Pellegrini hunted, harvested and gourmandized pheasant.

"Being around food was when I was my happiest," Pellegrini recalls of her childhood years sitting at the end of a long table after school watching her great-grandmother cook.

A locavore ahead of her time, she foraged and fished as a child on the family property in New York's Hudson Valley. "It tapped into my animal instincts."

It's not just about meats for Pellegrini, who uses every part of the animal, but sourcing from the land. Purslane and heirloom tomatoes excite her as much as deer liver mousse. Side-of-the-road yellow pears have made their way (via a favorite enhancer, brandy) onto dove she likely plucked and breasted in the field.

Ivy League educated, Pellegrini also graduated from the French Culinary Institute in New York City, and after working in a number of esteemed restaurants in New York and France, published her first book, "Food Heroes: Tales of 16 Artisans Preserving Tradition," which explores artisanal cooking traditions around the world. Her second book, "Girl Hunter," to be released this fall, addresses head-on where food comes from and includes recipes inspired by her visit to Joshua Creek Ranch.

She's made it her culinary mission to debunk wild game phobia. "I think it's all mental. If you don't tell people what it is, you don't freak them out and they love it."

A few simple ingredients are best in preparing wild game, she says. "Game in general lends itself to natural ingredients. You don't need to mask it; if you treat it well, you can use it to your advantage."

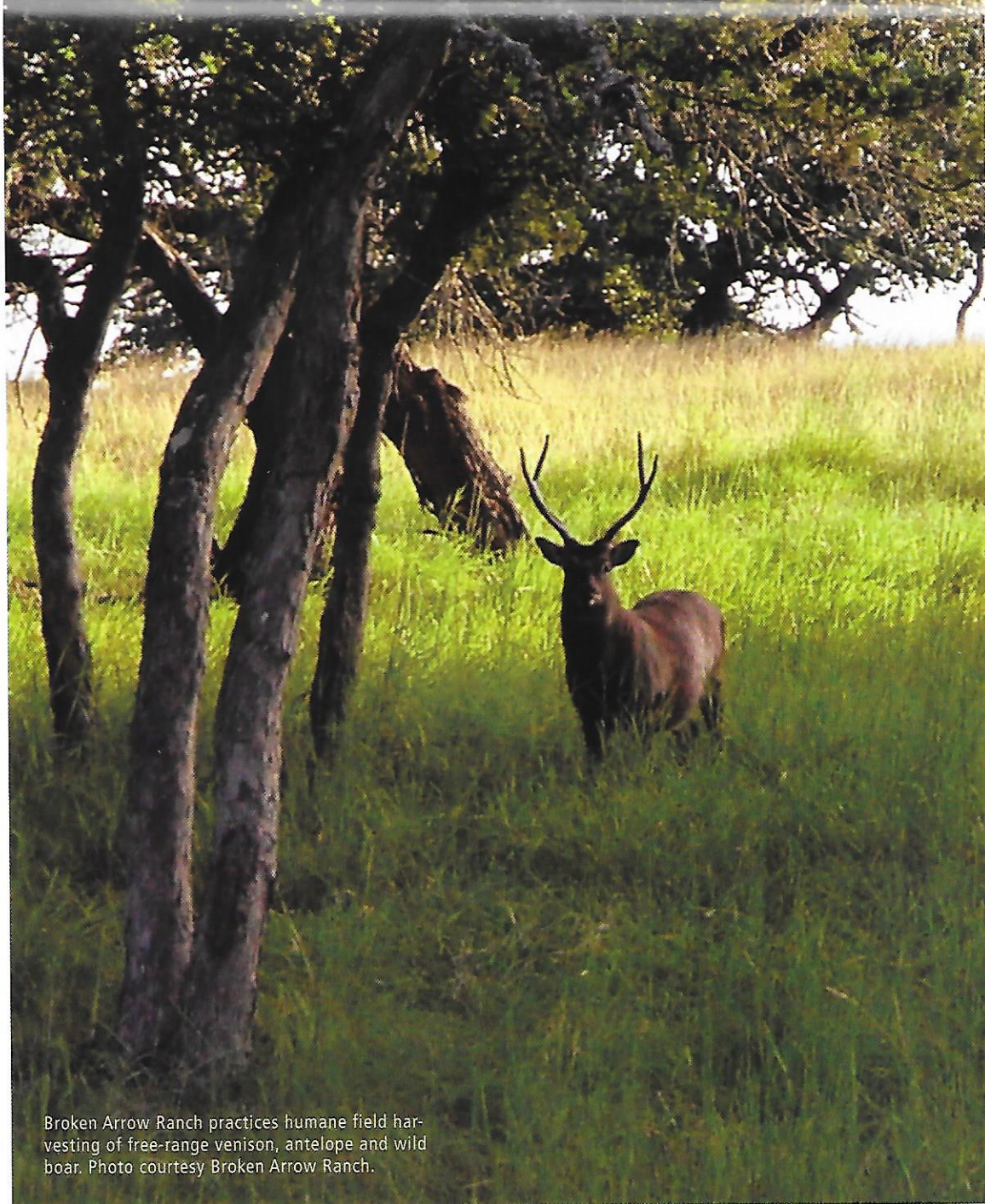
On this occasion, she dusted her freshly harvested pheasant with flour before sautéing it in butter and a little chicken stock. Red, black and green grapes, plus a touch of brandy, add sweetness and color; green cabbage lends texture, and "lemon makes it clean and fresh.

"I played a part in this meal," she says. "That's what's satisfying."

Game on

Chris Hughes, who runs Broken Arrow Ranch in Ingram, Texas, chuckles when people ask about what seems to be an increased interest in eating wild game. "Wild game meats have been popular for ten thousand years," he says with a laugh.

In fact, our ancestors heaved rocks and wooden spears in pursuit of a meal before an evolving upper class dubbed the exercise a sport, hence the



Broken Arrow Ranch practices humane field harvesting of free-range venison, antelope and wild boar. Photo courtesy Broken Arrow Ranch.



emergence of the term “game.”

Demand, however, lies more in a growing desire to eat natural foods and an increased awareness in humanely harvested game, according to Hughes. Gone are the days of falconry, but the hunger to consume foods outside the realm of industrial farming lives on.

Much of it, too, he says, is driven by Food Network. “People are more willing to try new things than, say, 10 years ago.”

Broken Arrow Ranch, a purveyor of free-range venison, antelope and wild boar, sources its game from about 150 ranches in Texas. “In any year, there are 30 to 40 that have a population issue,” he says.

Population management is a key part of his operation. Exotic game forage on whatever vegetation can be found, and when natural food supply is compromised, hunting animals with purpose helps return population to naturally sustainable levels. The average ranch spans about 4,000 acres, and any ranch selected by Broken Arrow must include at least 1,000 acres. “Ranchettes,” Hughes says, can cause stress to animals if they don’t have ample space to roam. Broken Arrow also looks to ranchers who don’t corral or medicate animals.

Full government-inspected, humane field harvesting, which Hughes says his father, Mike Hughes, introduced and helped get approved by the Texas

Department of Agriculture in 1983, is Broken Arrow Ranch’s founding philosophy. “It was pretty revolutionary,” he says.

Mobile processing facilities with a harvest crew and government meat inspector travel to the site, reducing the stress associated with transporting animals offsite for processing. Using sound-suppressed rifles and electrostimulation to contract the muscles renders a discernable flavor, color and texture to the meat, Hughes says. A gamier taste, he adds, comes from the lactic acid an animal produces when stressed.

Restaurateurs have taken to the approach. Broken Arrow Ranch supplies much of the wild game found on local menus at Francesca’s at Sunset, Citrus, Biga on the Banks and Il Sogno, as well as Thomas Keller’s Per Se in New York. Earl Abel’s now offers bison and venison.

“I think the demand for game has never gone away,” says Jeff Balfour, executive chef at Hotel Valencia. “It remains pretty constant, but the demand for local game has definitely exploded right along with the demand for local products.

“Lately we have been seeing a lot better quality of wild boar,” he adds. It all depends on Mother Nature, says Hughes, whose hunts might produce five animals on one visit and 20 on another.

“There’s not a more natural, sustainable food out there.”



Chef de cuisine Ernie Estrada at Francesca's at Sunset, the Westin La Cantera, creates an aspic of rabbit with rosemary, celery and carrots, topped with pear vinegar foam. Photo by Jamie Karutz.



Chef Estrada's file of antelope starts with leg loin, pan seared and served atop a wax bean salad, served with Texas fingerling potatoes and mesquite smoked cherry tomatoes. Photo by Jamie Karutz.

Recipes on Page 94

A HEALTHIER ALTERNATIVE

- Because they are more active, wild animals contain an average of 4.3 percent body fat, compared to 25 to 30 percent in domesticated varieties.
- Fat from wild game meat contains a higher proportion of polyunsaturated fatty acids and less saturated fat.
- A 4-ounce serving of axis venison contains 26 grams of protein and 1.9 fat grams, making it an ideal low-carbohydrate, low-fat choice.
- 3½ ounces of wild pheasant contain less than 1 percent fat and 52 milligrams cholesterol.
- Bison contains 70 to 90 percent less fat than beef and less fat and cholesterol than skinless chicken.



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