

WILD AT HEART

A High Country restaurant has made a name for itself by tapping into the wild side of fine dining. Inside the stone walls of The Gamekeeper, an avowed outdoorsman finds a connection to flavors past.

written by T. EDWARD NICKENS / photography by CHARLES HARRIS

It was a tough call between the emu appetizer — braised meat in adobo, charred salsa verde, queso fresco, and avocado crema — and the mixed game grill, tonight a global confluence of hanging beef tenderloin, Hungarian bison sausage, and venison sausage. Thank goodness the boar and pimento cheese sausage wasn't on the menu that night, or I'd still be sitting there, trying to make up my mind.

Which wouldn't be a bad thing. I'd heard about The Gamekeeper restaurant for years, and had driven by it a million times on my way to a trout stream or mountain view. Tucked into the big woods between Boone and Blowing Rock, framed with stacked stone walls and mossy boulders, lauded by *Wine Spectator*, it's one of the most romantic settings you can imagine.

But mostly, I'd been intrigued by The Gamekeeper's long focus on the wilder side of fine dining — an elevated approach to

farm-raised (as required by law) game species ranging from bison to antelope, from venison to emu to wild boar. You might even find smelts on the menu. You might even know what a smelt is.

So one chilly evening, warmed by a fire, I finally made my way to The Gamekeeper. The food on the plates might have been a little wild and woolly, but that's exactly what I was there for.

FOR YEARS, I HAVE OWNED A COPY OF AUGUSTE Escoffier's 1903 masterpiece, *Le Guide Culinaire*, translated into English as *The Complete Guide to the Art of Modern Cookery*. It's a 646-page monster, packed with 5,012 recipes. Hundreds are based on wild game and fish. And some are absolutely bonkers. Recipe No. 3,567, for Filets de Lièvre Dampierre, calls for five hare loins inlaid with slices of truffle and five bunny backstraps larded with salted ox tongue, all shaped into crescents and cooked on a buttered tray. That was

Chefs at The Gamekeeper restaurant use a wood-fired grill to prepare game meat like bison.





The Gamekeeper is housed in a stone cottage that was once part of Camp Yonahlossee. Now, guests enjoy their meals in one of several dining areas, including the Vineyard Room.

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the first of at least five steps, one of which involved Mousseline forcemeat. I have no idea what that is, but it isn't in my refrigerator.

But I also have a copy of Thomas Gilbert Pearson's 1937 *Adventures in Bird Protection*, in which the author — a former professor at Guilford College and what would become UNC Greensboro and cofounder of the National Association of Audubon Societies — laments the failure in 1913 of a bill to provide statewide protection for the common robin. Eleven counties adopted the bill, “but the representatives of nearly ninety counties,” Pearson wrote, “refused to give up their legal right to enjoy that Southern delicacy known as ‘robin-pie.’”

Robin pie. You don't see that at every church homecoming. But it wasn't so long ago that an everyday dinner in the South and elsewhere might have meant rabbit or duck or squirrel — or songbirds. Until market hunting was outlawed in 1918, the neighborhood grocer was just as likely to have a stash of local quail or rabbit as freshly milled flour and horehound candy.

IT'S ACTUALLY KIND OF FUNNY: IN 2000, WHEN current Gamekeeper owner Ken Gordon started looking for locations for a new restaurant, his intention was to offer a vegetarian menu at a diner-style establishment in Boone. The Gamekeeper was for sale at the time, having debuted in 1987 in a historic cottage that was once part of Camp Yonahlossee, a summer destination for young women that opened in the early 1920s. When Gordon walked inside the restaurant, he knew his search was over.

“It felt like home,” he says, “and it's been home for 24 years now. The feeling of it was perfect — the big fireplace, the big views through the forest, the sense of discovery you have when you arrive. But I'll be honest: We almost changed the name. We felt like people would be scared of a wild game



KEN GORDON

ramblin' man

The Gamekeeper pairs mountain flavors — like Leicester-raised Carolina bison, grilled over hickory and served with a chicken-of-the-woods mushroom ragout — with views of the High Country.



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concept. I'm so glad we didn't.”

And The Gamekeeper offers plenty of non-game offerings. There are always one or two fish dishes and a beef option. I love the description of the Veggie Plate: “A tasty sampling of almost every leaf, stalk, root, fruit, nut, grain, and flower in house and barbecue-brushed tempeh. Please specify if vegetarian or vegan!”

The restaurant was actually ahead of its time. Wild game cuisine is experiencing both a renaissance and a revolution across the country, but that wasn't the case when Gordon took the helm at The Gamekeeper. In the early days, he says, he had to have chicken on the menu. But soon enough, diners embraced the concept.

“Emu is an easy stepping stone to wild game,” he explains. “It's very similar to filet mignon. But people today are open to some crazy stuff. Antelope haggis? They say, *Bring it on!* We're not always trying to push the envelope, but when we do, folks really dive in.”

Wild game and wild fish have fed humanity for far longer than cattle ranches and catfish farms. In some ways, a meal at The Gamekeeper is an homage to the old days. In Europe,

much of the wild country and wild game were locked up for the royals. In America, the woods and waters were a great commons open to all.

Back then, game wasn't wild. It was just food.

Which is why I tried to act as nonchalant as possible when I dug into the bison short ribs on my plate. It wasn't easy. I'm a sucker for short ribs. Braised in merlot, encircled with garlic mashed potatoes and roasted veggies, the bison was crowned with Bordelaise — a “daughter sauce” of espagnole, one of the five “mother sauces” of French cuisine as defined by no less than Auguste Escoffier.

I wish he were around to give The Gamekeeper a try. Maybe he'd learn a culinary trick or two. But I know he wouldn't make the mistake I did for so many years: Pass it by. **Og**

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