



Pleasant pheasant

October signals the start of the pheasant season. Sarah Walmsley heads to Staffordshire to track down the source of the club's most pleasant birds.



When I took up scuba diving my father was frank in his advice: 'Don't drown Sarah.' He said. So I suppose it was to be expected when, on informing him that I was off to follow a pheasant shoot, his words of wisdom were similarly candid: 'Don't get shot Sarah'. It hadn't occurred to me that I might be on the receiving end of a twelve bore; so on the morning of the shoot, I find myself, loitering by a table piled high with bacon sandwiches, wearing a pair of B&Q Wellingtons with mild trepidation. The bacon sandwich table is surrounded. Men in tweed are all munching away, warming up before they strike out for this shooting party at Consall Valley. The shoot, owned by member Martin Pointon, is in the wilds of Staffordshire where the mix of woodland and moors makes for perfect pheasant country. Pheasants from the Consall Valley Shoot will be on tables in the club from now until January.

THE SHOOTING PARTY

I meet club member Chris Hogg, bacon sandwich in hand. Chris has been kind enough to let me come along and be the Butch Cassidy to his Sundance Kid for the day. At least I hope his shooting skills compare to the Sundance Kid – I am after all attempting to avoid getting shot. Chris has already drawn his peg, the position in the line of eight guns on the first drive, this position then moves along two pegs each drive. In shooting there's

a reassuring 'does what it says on the tin' quality to the language. Not only a weapon, a *gun* is one of the people doing the shooting. A *loader* is someone who loads the gun. A *drive* describes the way in which the birds are driven towards the guns. A *picker up* is someone, usually with a Springer Spaniel or two, who collects the birds once they have been shot. 'Once we are on the peg we are live,' says Chris, as we line up with the other guns in a clearing in the woods. There is a silence, made more acute by the ear defenders I have been given. Then, through the trees, I can hear the clattering and calling of the *beaters*, a pack of stick and flag wielding folk who advance through the wood in a line flushing out the pheasants towards the guns.

The birds are upon us, flapping through the air, shots ring out from pegs further down the line. As a bird flies in our direction Chris raises his gun, he tracks the bird's line of flight and fires two shots into the air. I cheer silently as the pheasant makes his escape. There's a flurry of activity to reload the gun once each of the barrels is spent. A second bird flies overhead. This one isn't so lucky. I cheer for Chris silently: this pheasant business creates rather divided loyalties. A third bird comes our way, this time much lower in the sky, a veritable sitting duck of a pheasant, but Chris doesn't even pull the trigger. 'Its important not to take low birds' he says, 'there's no sport in it'.

The guns shoot and reload. The pheasant fly into range: some are shot and plummet to the earth with

a dull thud; others live to flap another day. After around 40 minutes a whistle signals the end of the drive and whilst the picker ups finish collecting the birds, the guns congregate for a congratulatory snifter of alcohol, all pleased with the spoils of the first drive. With relief I accept a soupçon of Baileys in my coffee, Chris appears to know what he is doing and I have, for the moment, evaded death.

FAIR GAME

The ringmaster of all this beating, shooting and picking up is Ray Edge, gamekeeper at Consall Valley. Even though the season starts on 1 October, Ray works year round to make the shoots happen. Young pheasants, known as poults, are reared in pens dotted around the woods for two to three weeks. They are weaned on wheat before being released into the wild at the end of July. The pheasants are then kept in the boundaries of the shoot by a process know as dogging in. 'I go out with the dogs at first light and walk the perimeter of the shoot', says Ray. 'We do it three times a day from July to September, I must walk around 20 miles a day'. With the season underway Ray organises each shoot day, as well passing the birds on to game dealers.

CLUB PHEASANT

Pheasant from Consall Valley is bought up by butcher to the club Finclass. Not only is Chris Hogg my Sundance Kid, he runs Finclass with his father Gordon, who is also a member of the club. 'Most game

birds are best after hanging' says Chris, 'pheasant tends to be tougher than other poultry as the animals were wild so moved around a lot more.' The birds are hung for two to three days - the longer the hanging period the stronger the flavour; 'some of the clubs used to hang the birds for a long time, sometimes ten days - the meat is very high then, its an acquired taste.' Once tender and tasty the pheasant is ready for the club table.

SUNDANCE KID

Top shot at Consall Valley, Roy Flood, gives his top gun tips.

- Fit and balance of gun (the gun must shoot where you are looking)
- Gun Cartridge combination is important, this does not mean that you have to buy an expensive gun, but it must pattern well at 70 yards.
- Always check your gun on a pattern plate (it will give you more confidence to take on high birds)
- Never buy a gun without trying it on a pattern plate.
- Feet and balance must be right (feet should face the target area).
- Learn to focus on the target.
- Understand your lead time - it's not just the time it takes for the shot to reach the target, it's the time it takes for the message to travel from your head to the trigger. This varies by person and distance. You should learn and understand your lead time.
- Move the gun with the bird, keep on it applying your lead time. By keeping on the bird you establish its speed and line (never let the bird overtake the gun.)

PHOTOGRAPHS: JANE EASTMAN





HOW TO MAKE ROAST PHEASANT

By Head Chef at Woodcote Park
Howard Bisset

2 Whole pheasant

1 Savoy cabbage

200g Chicken livers (halved)

3 Round shallots

1 Clove garlic

6 Medium parsnips

2 Tablespoons honey

100g Butter

Pinch of paprika

1kg Red Desiree potatoes

1 litre Chicken stock

1 Slice white bread

1 Egg yolk

50ml Double cream

Salt and pepper

Red wine

1. Remove the outside leaves of the cabbage and discard. Take the next four leaves and set aside. Cut the remaining cabbage in to four and very finely slice one of the quarters and keep for later.

2. Take the four large leaves. Cut out each stalk but leave leaf whole. Blanch in boiling salted water; refresh in iced water, drain and dry on kitchen roll. Finely dice shallots, crush garlic and sweat off together in a pan with a little butter. Meanwhile lightly whisk egg yolk and cream, and soak the bread in it. When the shallots are cooked, add finely sliced cabbage and sauté in butter for two minutes. In a separate hot frying pan, add the chicken livers and fry for two minutes, then add to the sautéed cabbage and leave to cool. When cool add the soaked bread and bind



together to form a farce. Divide the farce into four and place in the middle of a cabbage leaf. Place in a cloth and twist and squeeze each to form a tight ball. Set in the fridge for two hours. When ready to serve, heat a pan with a little butter, add the cabbage balls and colour slightly. Add a ladle of chicken stock, bring to the boil and then place in the oven for 10 minutes.

3. Peel and cut potatoes and wash under cold water to remove starch and any dirt. Place on stove, cover with chicken stock to a depth of one inch. Add butter and seasoning and bring to the boil. Turn down heat and simmer until 90% of the stock has evaporated. Whilst hot place the potatoes in a food processor and blend until smooth, check seasoning and set aside somewhere warm.

4. Remove the wishbone and claws from the pheasant. With a blowtorch singe off any feathers that remain. Remove the legs from the crown and keep for a later dish. To a hot frying pan add a little vegetable oil, season the crown inside and out with salt and pepper. Carefully place the crowns in the

frying pan, turning over to achieve an even golden colour. Place in a pre heated oven on 200°C for 10-12 minutes. Remove from the oven and add 50g of butter to the pan. Baste over the crown and then place somewhere warm to rest.

5. After 10 minutes remove crown from pan and place on a clean baking tray. Skim the oil/butter from the pan. Return to the heat add one chopped shallot. Cook until coloured and then quickly deglaze with a glass of quality red wine. Reduce by half. Add the chicken stock and again reduce by half. Pass the liquid through a fine sieve and keep aside for serving. To remove the breast from the crown run a very sharp knife down the back bone and follow underneath of the breast, keeping the knife on the bone so as not to leave any meat on the bone.

6. Peel the parsnips, blanch in boiling salted water and refresh in ice water, cut into quarters lengthways. In a frying pan heat a little vegetable oil and a knob of butter. Add parsnips and colour to golden. Place in the oven for five minutes. Serve with the pheasant.