

MACNAB'S ON THE MENU

If you haven't bagged a Macnab, eat one instead. A top London restaurant is offering special dishes in honour of *The Field's* challenge, says **Hattie Ellis**. Photographs by **Davin Dhillon**

IN an age of processed commodities, wild food offers the glamour of the elusive. Whether foraged, shot or caught, it provides the ultimate taste of a place, be it the briny gulp of an oyster, the lean flesh of game, hedgerow berries or seashore plants. No wonder chefs and diners are mad for it. But the trick is to get the ingredients from the country to the sophisticated city table with their particular beauty intact.

To show how it's done, Dumfriesshire-based game dealer Ben Weatherall invites a top chef to a grouse shoot. As chef director of the Caprice group, Tim Hughes is responsible for the food served at a string of London's top noshing stops, including the J Sheekey fish

and seafood restaurant, Scott's, The Ivy and Le Caprice. He is a fan of wild produce. "It's not been mucked around with," he says.

This autumn, Hughes has created a special menu for the private room of Scott's that showcases wild food. Based on *The Field's* Macnab Challenge (for details, go to www.macnabchallenge.co.uk), the set meal will bring the wild Scottish countryside to the plates of his Mayfair diners.

To start, there's a Dumfriesshire grouse salad with a wild bilberry dressing. This is followed by poached organic salmon with foraged sea vegetables and sauce mousseline. Then Glencoe venison will be served with a Scottish cep pie and elderberry sauce. Finally,

Percy Weatherall, who co-owns the moor, goes for a grouse, and a group Macnab, on the Weatherall family shoot in Dumfriesshire

there's a Scottish raspberry cranachan, a dish of cream, honey, whisky, oats and berries.

Back in Scotland, Weatherall catches a salmon in the Nith a couple of hours before supper and rushes the fish to the kitchen. It illustrates perfectly why wild food is so wonderful. The cooked flesh is juicy yet tender and a blue sheen of life still blushes the skin. Each forkful has that subtle mineral tang of freshness that is as strong and fleeting as a vapour.

Early the following morning, Hughes joins the Weatherall family on a shoot over >





Clockwise from far left: Tim Hughes; Gandalf retrieves; Chris Gray and Ben Weatherall with German short-haired pointers; the lunch

some of the 6,000 acres of heather moorland that are part of their hill farm. Grouse numbers have risen in the past two years, probably thanks to a wormer put in the grit the birds eat to help them digest the heather shoots. But there's always the uncertainty about whether the guns will go home with a full bag.

Today, two pointers quarter the moor, running across the wind. They stop, stock-still, at the scent of a bird. It's a sign for everyone; the bright collars of the tense dogs become a focal point amid the scudding clouds and high, open countryside. Then the birds fly up fast, slightly nervy after recent rain.

With four brace of grouse safely in the bag, we sit down to a picnic lunch of cold grouse baps with salsa verde.

Weatherall delivers game to some of the top chefs in the country through his company, Yorkshire Game, and to other meat-lovers through an online mail order butcher's, The Blackface Meat Company.

He explains the care that goes into the process of delivering game these days. The grouse shot on the moors are put into chilled units. His refrigerated vans go to 30-odd moors, from Angus down to Derbyshire, to collect them the following day. Then it's straight to a dedicated holding chiller in North Yorkshire that can contain 10,000 birds. "We're handling the game properly, checking temperatures in the fridge, processing on a line so there's minimal handling of the birds, putting it neatly in trays," Weatherall explains. It's a long way from lobbing game into a pile in the back of a mucky van.

The variables of the wild-meat business can be seen most clearly in venison. The best time to kill the animal is not always the best time to eat its meat. While red stags, for example, are in peak eating condition in the summer, this is when they go up to the high ground to get away from the midges and their antlers are covered in velvet and no good for trophies. Consequently, there are more shot in the autumn, towards the end of the season. But the animals are then ready for the rut and the testosterone spoils the flavour of the meat.

Continental diners tend to like stronger-flavoured game, so such venison can be exported. But Weatherall must pick untainted meat at the right time to please British diners.

Fortunately, dedicated stalkers provide venison all through the year and different species come into the rutting season at different times. In the autumn, Weatherall also picks out the venison from the females that are

Right: from moor to restaurant via Yorkshire Game. Scott's Macnab starter is Dumfriesshire grouse salad with a wild bilberry dressing

well-fed after the summer. Some chefs complain that the saddles are small (3kg-5kg, when they prefer the 5kg-10kg stag saddles – and they can get up to 14kg from mighty beasts in Galloway). But Weatherall knows that this sweet hind meat is the best choice.

The growing popularity of wild meat – he says the game market has been growing 10% year on year – is regularly boosted by the endorsement of celebrity chefs: "Come the autumn they want to talk about something that's seasonal, fresh and British. Game hits all those buttons."

It's time for the second half of this wild food story: the kitchen. The train takes Hughes and his birds south to Scott's. An oyster warehouse, founded in 1851 by John Scott, became a glamorous restaurant that attracted film stars and stylish Londoners. Ian Fleming is said to have discovered the "shaken not stirred" Martini here and used it for his character, James Bond. More recently, Scott's was given a new lease of life by the Caprice group and reopened in 2006 to great acclaim.

There's a brief flash of its glamorous interior before a door takes us abruptly into the underground kitchens, a well-oiled human machine of white jackets moving with speed and efficiency. The countryside comes to this kitchen from dozens of sources and is sorted on to chillroom shelves. This larder is to a cook as the library to the writer or the palette to the painter. Lobsters sit in plastic boxes, huge cock crabs are cooked and ready, and Hughes professes a langoustine, sucking the meat out of the head of another. "It's the best bit," he says.

The rising popularity of wild food among chefs is a sign of the times, he says. "When I did my training [in the Eighties], it was all about food looking pretty rather than tasting great." Now, there's a more natural style of cooking, with a greater emphasis on flavour and provenance. Wild food fits this bill.

The quality of game has risen, too, partly encouraged by fussier customers like these London chefs. Tastes have moved from "high", well-hung game to subtler flavours, including the special treat of grouse, a slight bitterness combining with the sweetness of its heather-and-bilberry diet coming through in the flesh.

Normally, the grouse served at Scott's is roasted and accompanied by game chips, bacon, buttered cabbage and bread sauce. Hughes believes in fast-roasting at a high temperature and puts garlic cloves and a bay leaf in the centre of each bird, along with plenty of butter to help keep it moist. ➤





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But to start *The Field* Macnab menu, Tim’s grouse salad partners the meat with the bird’s own food, bilberries, and some blanched salsify. Served alongside the venison will be a sauce made from game stock and elderberries.

This wild fruit comes from specialist suppliers, some of whom now have their own dedicated foragers. Alternatively, Hughes and his chefs will pick the berries themselves, from Clapham Common or the South Downs in Sussex, near where he lives. If they spot it, they’ll get it, he says.

The best ceps used to come from Scotland, he believes, but nowadays they seem to be rarer and most come instead from places such as the New Forest, Ashdown Forest and Epping Forest. “There are a lot of Italian boys who go down to Aldershot picking mushrooms,” he says. “They try to turn off to make sure nobody is following them.” As well as British fungi, a fair number of fresh mushrooms is imported from places such as Spain.

Chefs are now joining forces with this new breed of professional forager, who seeks out wild plants such as the sea vegetables that Scott’s will serve alongside its salmon. The rules of foraging are complicated and eco-systems must be protected. But some harvesting can help new growth and the interest in wild

food means more attention is paid to the land, just as grouse-shooting means heather moorland is maintained.

In his new recipe book, *7 Sheekey Fish*, Hughes praises the way these wild vegetables go alongside fish, whether it is sea purslane with parsley, cockles and cod, or wilted sea beet and wild garlic with white fish. He likes

Menu Macnab: poached organic salmon (top left); Glencoe venison (top right); Scottish raspberry cranachan (below)



the salty crunch of marsh samphire in a red gurnard salad or with cod cheeks and a tartare sauce. Wild food is the ultimate in seasonality: it’s here, it’s gone, so enjoy it now. “Cooking fish is all about the moment,” he writes, encapsulating the appeal of all such food.

From the kitchen, we go up to the restaurant to sit at the bar and order a dozen of Scott’s many types of oyster, each of which has a savour of the water where it was harvested.

The place has pizzazz. In the centre of the circular central bar is a huge arrangement of shellfish in ice. The life of the sea has become the still life of a city night out. All around are people talking, laughing, eating, living.

And, yes, the purity of nature can still be tasted in the food, not least in the moorland flesh of the grouse. Wild food should never be totally tamed, and that’s the ultimate in sophistication. However far from the sea, moor or field, its freshness and special flavours should still be there, a taste of the wild in the glamour of London. ■

The *Field Macnab* menu is available in Scott’s Private Room until 10 December 2012. To book, call 020 7307 5783 or visit www.scotts-restaurant.com. To order game from *The Blackface Meat Company*, the sister company of *Yorkshire Game*, call 01748 810212 or go to www.blackface.co.uk

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