

# For the Love

Chef James Lowe champions field-to-fork cuisine on his annual hunt in Scotland.

*by Tarajia Morrell. Photographs by Anton Rodriguez*

## of the Game



Left: Chef Lisa Lov on Scotland's river Dee. Below: Mallard leg and liver with yellow chanterelles and dehydrated damson plum at Lyle's restaurant in London.



**"NOW THAT THE RAIN'S** stopped, a deer is going to come out of the forest," says Sam Thompson, a burly hunter in a camouflage tweed suit. We are near Dinnet, in the Scottish Highlands. With me are Thompson, owner of Ardale Deer, a sporting and land management outfit, and Lisa Lov, a chef from Copenhagen. Soon we see a lone buck feeding on the grass.

Following Thompson, we creep along a fence, across a stream, and onto a perch, where Lov props the barrel of her .270-caliber rifle onto a post and waits.

We are here because of James Lowe, the chef-owner of acclaimed East London restaurant Lyle's. In the United Kingdom, where food inspection is less industrial than in other countries, wild game may be sold in restaurants, and no one has been a more passionate proponent of serving it than Lowe. For four years, Lowe, 39, has invited a coterie of renowned chefs to join him in Scotland for three days of deer stalking, bird shooting, and fly-fishing, followed by dinners at Lyle's to feast on the bounty.

(To reserve for the 2018 game dinners on September 14 and 15, visit [lyleslondon.com](http://lyleslondon.com).) Our excursion includes Lov, who most recently cooked at Copenhagen's Relæ and soon will open Tigermom; chef David Posey of Elske in Chicago; Petter Nilsson of Stockholm's Spritmuseum; and Victor Liong of Lee Ho Fook, in Melbourne.

Lowe, blue-eyed and boyishly handsome, spent four years as head chef at Fergus Henderson's nose-to-tail bastion, St. John Bread and Wine. If Henderson crusaded for the pleasures of offal, Lowe has positioned himself as a champion of British game.



"I want to offer people an experience they can't have elsewhere," he explains. "There are few restaurants where they can eat wild animals."

The menu at Lyle's is a love letter to Britain's bounty, an oxymoron for neophytes who assume English food is just fish and chips. In Lowe's hands humble British foods like blood cake and grilled eel become revelations. The game offerings include grouse, mallard, quail, rabbit, and, of course, venison.

"It's a very lean meat," Lowe says, adding that its growing popularity is a testament to the "power of chefs to change the way a culture views a food."

**AFTER PLACING THE BUCK** in her sights, Lov awaits a signal from Thompson.

"Deer are wild animals, but hunting is actually similar to agriculture," Thompson says, citing the responsibility to maintain a healthy herd. The buck has the graying face of an older animal, too senior to withstand another winter. However, Thompson won't authorize a shot that could wound but not kill it. One clean shot or none at all.

Proponents of hunting have long used conservation as a rationale for the sport, and nowhere is the evidence clearer than in the field, where treetops are home to pigeons and grouse, hedgerows to pheasant and mallard. If the sport helps protect the land, then such pastoral beauty makes a case for the sport, as does the diversity of flavors it offers. Indeed, whereas we're conditioned to expect consistency from farmed meat, every wild animal, master of its own destiny and finder of its own food, tastes a bit different, as we find when we sample the quarry.

At Thompson's signal, the rifle rings out. Adrenaline powers the buck 30 yards and over the field's

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four-foot fence. With acute reverence, Thompson and Lov field dress the deer on an embankment above a stream. If butchery does not appeal to the squeamish, then removing the gralloch of a still-warm, gentle-eyed animal may be unthinkable. Yet it's one of the most honest confrontations possible with what it means to eat meat. As Lowe says, "People think it more inhumane to kill a wild animal than to have an animal reared intensively on a farm and killed young. What could be more humane than letting a deer live to a ripe age in the wild, in freedom, killing it quickly, and wasting none of it?"

**AT MIDDAY**, the chefs convene with their haul. Lov removes a grouse's head, revealing the contents of its gullet, a last meal of perfectly intact purple heather flowers and ripe red fruit, which Nilsson confirms as lingonberries. This becomes the inspiration for Posey's dish served back at Lyle's a few days later. Biting into the sublimely tender roasted grouse with heather-infused hollandaise, I'm struck by the continuity of the arc from field to fork, the thoughtfulness of flavor combination, an elegy to the grouse. As for the buck, in Lov's hands it becomes a chili-spiked tartare laced with lemongrass, as well as a fragrant hot-and-sour soup. She wants to go hunting in Sweden when she returns home, adding, "I want to use wild game as often as I can."

*Above: Chef Victor Liong follows Sam Thompson of Ardale Deer into the Scottish woods.  
Below: James Lowe, owner of Lyle's.*

