



Dear Chef,

I think all of us agree that to see a really viable future for our industry, it is critical that restaurants utilize the most sustainable, environmentally aware, and humanely gathered ingredients in our restaurants as possible. The ideal protein should have had a great life, a humane end, should produce minimal methane, be extremely healthy, have a high protein to fat level and be supremely delicious to eat. It should also be desirable to the consumer and not seen as niche. There is one meat that fulfils all these criteria here in the UK – Wild Venison.

The reason I am writing this letter is to talk about the massive growth, post pandemic, of the UK wild deer population. UK, and particularly English and lowland Scottish deer populations having been growing steadily for the last 20 years, with the deer outbreeding efforts to manage numbers year on year. The Covid pandemic has massively accelerated the issue. Precise numbers are impossible to determine due to a lack of accurate data, but the reasons are simple.

When the first lockdown happened in March 2020, all restaurants shut abruptly – a huge blow to our industry. March is also the final month of the female deer harvest, and key to controlling numbers. Scroll forward to November 2020 – the start of the following female deer season. An effective total closure of UK Hospitality for the ENTIRE female season (November to March) meant a huge reduction in deer harvest, since most deer are harvested, then sold to game dealers, who process then sell at least 50 % of wild deer to hospitality.

The result the closure of hospitality was game dealers reduced their buying (not entirely, but to a large extent) and deer managers reduced their shooting, again, not entirely, but to a vastly reduced extent. Add in Brexit, which has meant a massive reduction in export of UK wild game to Europe, and the perfect conditions for a huge rise in population is there. The consensus among the UK game dealers I talked to, is that about 50% of normal numbers were bought in the 20/21 deer season (far less in some cases). At the time of writing, (July 2021) the key species that are causing environmental harm (Fallow, Sika) have just dropped their young. If 50% fewer female deer were harvested than usual (and this is a big variable, as precise data is not known) then we WILL see a huge increase in deer in 2021/22, far above normal annual growth.*

The Government has committed to planting huge numbers of trees over the next 10 years – 30,000 hectares a year which will be severely impacted by our huge deer population. Biodiversity in woodlands will be harmed, with natural regeneration nearly impossible as ever

larger numbers of deer browse seedlings and clear undergrowth. Agriculture will be affected with large areas of crops damaged, and road traffic collisions will increase dramatically.

However, we can do something about this and tap into something astonishing – a truly sustainable resource of wild protein, that the public love to eat. (In all my restaurants, wild venison is the no1 seller by far)

I would ask my fellow Chefs and Restaurateurs to embrace this ingredient, and to make Wild Venison THE protein of the next few years. If we all search out legitimate sources of Wild Venison, that have been correctly processed and inspected, and if we try to use whole carcasses (not always possible

but amazing if you can), then we as an industry will be helping the UK environment directly and massively. Just think – if through this initiative we can double the domestic consumption of wild deer, the growth in numbers will slow to manageable levels. Ultimately, we are trying to achieve a sustainable, healthy population of these amazing animals, and give us a long term, wild protein resource.

You can buy from Game Dealers, but please also be aware of a growing number of fantastic small producers who take the deer straight from the woods to you. This allows you to have full provenance and a great story to tell and the scheme also benefits those in food poverty. As we grow this initiative you will find more and more artisan suppliers, game dealers, deer managers and estates who cull and process wild venison to the highest standard that you as chefs can go to for the supply of this incredible ingredient. Whole venison carcasses are staggeringly versatile and incredibly good value, helping our GPs into the bargain.

All the suppliers on our website will have also committed to helping us support The Country Food Trust (TCFT). This charity creates amazing, healthy meals using venison and will donate this incredible ingredient to some of the neediest, hungry children in Britain including projects dear to Chefs' hearts like the Felix Project in London. To see more details please visit www.thecountryfoodtrust.org

Bottom line – if we put it on our menus, use the whole beast, and explain the wonderful flavour and provenance the public will eat it and the deer problem will come under control, protecting our woodland, and ensuring the countryside is protected and in balance and we will help feed kids in need. Be part of the solution – please help us sell more venison.

Thank you for reading this, I really hope this project will become a useful tool to help you access this untapped food resource. And thank you to all my peers in our industry listed below who are supporting this endeavour.

Yours Sincerely,

Mike Robinson

*N.B All numbers for deer are best estimates, not official records

THE
COUNTRY FOOD
TRUST