



Jon Hollinger of Aspen Outfitting Co. on a dove shoot in Delta, Colorado.

A BIRD IN THE HAND

Aspen Outfitting brings hunting back to basics

By David Frey

For local bird hunters, it is a rite of autumn. On the last day of August, hunters from throughout western Colorado converge on the North Fork Valley, where thousands of mourning doves have filled the fields, gorging on grain as they make their migration from the Colorado high country to the desert.

The hunters have their own bacchanal, listening to bluegrass bands and filling up on local specialties at the Paonia foodie haven Fresh & Wyld. At dawn, they head out in camouflage and khakis and take aim. It's the first day of dove hunting season in Colorado, and for hunters, the first hint of coming fall. It's a great day to be a hunter. By evening, the doves are dinner.

"Dove breasts are among the absolute most wonderful meat you can eat in the world," says Jon Hollinger, owner of Aspen Outfitting Co., a hunting and fishing outfitting company based at the St. Regis hotel in Aspen, who organizes the trip every year. "The North Fork Valley doves

are the nicest-tasting doves I have eaten anywhere in the world."

That's high praise from Hollinger, who has hunted birds around the world, and who leads hunting trips for clients throughout western Colorado. His shop has the feel you expect from a British gun club. The walls are lined with pricey double-barrel shotguns he orders from Spain's Basque country. It used to be, Hollinger sort of hid away his guns. Hunting has a long tradition in Colorado, but guns aren't quite so popular in Aspen, where locals are more likely to hunt for wild asparagus than wild animals.

The local food movement may be changing that, though. Progressive attitudes toward food are shifting away from doing without meat to avoiding chemicals and hormones. As more and more consumers become conscious about where their meat comes from, many are willing to be carnivores as long as they can be locavores.

Hunters may not have to keep their camo in the back of the closet anymore.



Patience is essential when hunting wild bird or game.

“The food’s better than any food you can buy,” says Jerrod Hollinger, who runs the outfitting business with his father. “As my dad has often said, if it’s out there alive, it’s because it’s perfect. It’s surviving in the wilderness alone. You’re getting the very best of the best.”

His high school friends didn’t get it, he says. Growing up in a hunting family in Aspen was unusual to say the least. But people are starting to understand, Jerrod says. “There is this back-to-basics, back-to-traditions movement,” he says. “Everybody understands how unhealthy our food is. Hunting is part of our heritage and tradition.”

That’s especially true in Colorado, where big game hunting has been an integral part of the Western lifestyle. For generations, fathers and sons—and, to a lesser degree, mothers and daughters—have headed out into the mountains in the fall in search of deer and elk to fill their freezers for the winter.

Bird hunting has never been quite as popular. Still, Jon Hollinger says, not long ago, plenty of Roaring Fork Valley residents were bird hunters. “They were pretty much your average Joes,” he says. “They were plumbers and electricians and contractors and well drillers.”

As the cost of living rose in the valley in recent years, many of those people left. At the same time, hunting across the country declined in popularity. Wildlife managers across the United States have upped their hunter education programs in an effort to get young people interested in the sport again.


“It’s the curse of the digital age,” says Jon Hollinger, his hunting

dog Pepper, a black-and-white-flecked German shorthair pointer, at his side.

When dove season opens, though, it’s still a locals’ crowd that descends on the North Fork Valley for hunting and feasting. Doves, it seems, have taken well to global warming. They’re desert birds, Hollinger says, the only game bird in the country whose numbers are on the rise. In the North Fork Valley, they find plenty of wheat, sorghum and other grains to fill them up for the fall flight south.

Throughout the fall and winter, the Hollingers take clients to hunt blue grouse, duck, goose and pheasant. Come January, they have a similar celebration, ending the season with a mallard hunt and sautéed duck breast for dinner.

“You couldn’t have a better time,” Jerrod Hollinger says. “You couldn’t be in a better place. The people I go out with are great people. And the food aspect, that’s always been a big deal.”

And every year, a few new faces show up, the Hollingers say, giving them hope that the American hunting tradition hasn’t run out of ammunition yet. 

GO FIND IT!

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Mourning Dove

Courtesy of Jeffrey Johnston, Aspen

For birds that have been shot so that the breast meat is completely or mostly untouched, use the following preparation:

15 doves, cleaned and plucked

Kosher salt

¼ cup clarified butter (ghee)

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

½ cup sifted flour

Fresh thyme leaves

Well-seasoned cast-iron skillet

Soak cleaned doves in a brine solution of salt and water for 5–10 minutes. Allow doves to thoroughly air dry (2–3 hours). Once dry, place doves breast side up onto a cutting board and press flat with the heel of your hand, being careful not to tear the skin. Cutting collarbones on bigger birds will help.

Heat the skillet to medium-hot; use equal amounts of ghee and olive oil to coat the bottom. The skillet is hot enough when a pinch of flour sizzles in the oil. While the skillet is heating, dredge dried, pressed doves in flour. Shake off excess, as a light coating is best.



Add flour-coated doves to the skillet in small batches of 2 or 3. Cook each batch for 3–5 minutes. Turning once, brown the doves for one-third of the time on top and two-thirds of the time on back. Do not overcook; medium-rare is best! Sprinkle thyme leaves over the dove during the last minute of cooking.



Delta County Mourning Dove

*Courtesy of Jon Hollinger,
Aspen Outfitting Co.*

Dove shooting is exciting and fast. The birds come from all angles and the shots vary in distance from 15 to 40 yards. The quality of meat for the table depends on the amount of pellets that each individual dove has contacted. Colorado has a one-day limit of 15 doves per hunter. Birds should be field dressed and put on ice as soon as possible after harvest.

To clean doves, use sharp kitchen shears to remove the head, wings and feet. Pluck each bird, being careful not to tear the skin. Use shears to cut along both sides of the backbone. Remove backbone along with all viscera (internal organs), saving the heart and gizzard for use in other dishes if desired. Rinse cavity well, being careful to remove any and all remnants of viscera.

For heavily shot birds, we suggest the following preparation:

15 dove breasts, skins removed
Kosher salt
4 Anaheim peppers
1/4 pound Monterey Jack cheese
1/2 pound inexpensive, fatty breakfast-style bacon
Savory barbecue sauce of your choice
30 quality wooden toothpicks

With a sharp boning-type knife, remove the breast meat from both sides of the keel bone of each dove. Discard all badly shot portions. Using salt and water, prepare enough brine solution to soak the remaining useable filets for 5-10 minutes. While the filets are soaking, wash peppers and remove all seeds. Cut peppers and thinly slice the cheese into pieces roughly the same area as the breast filets. Cut strips of bacon into halves. Remove filets from the brine and pat dry on paper towels. Make "sandwiches" in the following manner: one breast filet, one piece of pepper, one piece of cheese, second breast filet. Wrap each "sandwich" in a half strip of bacon and secure with a toothpick through the center. Apply barbecue sauce liberally, and arrange on a cookie sheet or plate for transport to the grill. Grill at medium heat for approximately 3 minutes per side.

Seared Mallard Breast with Spice Rub

Courtesy of Chef Dava Parr, Fresh & Wyld Farmhouse Inn and Gardens, Paonia

Every year Jon Hollinger and his merry band of hunters come to Paonia and surrounding hills and dales to hunt for, and dine on, duck. Over the last two years we've been treated to bluegrass music by a couple of Jon's extraordinary guides, and when combined with the wonderful people and fresh duck, it all makes for a memorable occasion. The Aspen Outfitting group brings in enough duck to feed 40 people, so I invite the village for what has now become Fresh & Wyld's Annual Duck Hunter's Dinner. Aspen Outfitting reminds me of why I choose to cook and live in Paonia, and makes me proud to be a chef!

For the rub:

Enough for 4 Mallard breasts

1 teaspoon smoked paprika
1 teaspoon paprika
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon coriander
1/2 teaspoon cumin seed
1 tablespoon dried Ancho chili

Toast the above ingredients in a dry pan, until it just starts to smoke, then add the following:

1/2 teaspoon thyme
1/2 teaspoon sea salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
2 teaspoons brown sugar

I make enough of this rub to fill a quart jar so I have it on hand for other meats, pork and chicken.

For the duck:

4 Mallard breasts
Salt
1 tablespoon olive oil
2 tablespoons clarified butter (ghee)

Early in the day, prepare a brine with 1 quart of water and 3 tablespoons of salt. Remove any downy feathers from the breasts. Soak the breasts for a few hours. Drain and dry duck thoroughly. Press the spice rub on the breasts and allow to sit for 1-2 hours.

Heat a skillet and add olive oil and butter. Place the breasts in the skillet, but don't overcrowd. Let them cook for 2 or 3 minutes on each side, aiming for a medium-rare temperature. This is important! You want a hot skillet to sear the meat well, but you don't want to leave it in the pan long enough to overcook. Medium doneness is overcooked for wild game! Sometimes I make a reduction with the duck drippings, deglazed with red wine, honey and cold pats of butter, to thicken the sauce.