

GAME ON

A ROADKILL COOK-OFF IN THE RURAL MOUNTAINS OF WEST VIRGINIA POKES GOOD-NATURED FUN AT THE STATE'S HILLBILLY REPUTATION AND INTRODUCES THE PUBLIC TO WILD GAME

by DANIELLE TAYLOR

The sophisticated Manhattan interviewer from Zagat looked a little unsure of herself as she peered into the spattering pan of browning bear meat. Holding back her chic scarf from the fragrant steam, she timidly asked, “Is this... healthy?”

The cook snorted. “Lord, no!” he boomed, laughing. “Look at the grease!”

“Is any of this healthy?” she inquired, taken aback.

He considered this for a moment, then explained, “That’s not exactly the point.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at this as I savored my calorie-dense sample of gravy-laden pheasant, chukar, and chicken served over waffles. Instead, “delicious” is the name of the game at Marlinton, West Virginia’s annual **Roadkill Cook-Off**, held since 1993 during the town’s Autumn Harvest Festival. Actually, the name of the game is possum, groundhog, squirrel, deer, bear, snake, turtle, raccoon or any other animal “commonly found dead along the side of the road,” according to the event’s official rules. However, the animals used in the contest aren’t actually allowed to come from such an authentic fate. As the morning kicked off, the announcer jokingly assured us that folks from the chamber of commerce would inspect all meat to make sure it didn’t contain “excessive” gravel. “You kill it, we’ll grill it!” he proclaimed to the laughing crowd. “You fender it, we’ll render it!”

The event’s organizers definitely run their quirky contest with a strong

dose of humor, and many of the contestants get into the backwoods spirit of the event by creatively titling their dishes things like Drunken Deer Chili with Ramped-Up Rice and Busted Tailgate Barbecue Mac and Cheese. However, the contest also helps introduce the broader public to the wide range of tastes and possibilities offered by wild game. Last year, team Mama Mia took home third place for their elegant Braised Venison with Portobello Mushrooms, Celery Root, and Toasted Pecans.

I chatted with other attendees as we waited in line to eat, and it genuinely surprised me to learn how many people there had never tried wild meat before. In addition to a lot of locals, many of this year’s estimated 10,000 attendees had come from places like Atlanta, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh to try a few shotglass-sized portions of dead animals from the woods.

Once the tastings started, we tried Kountry Kookin’ Hillbilly Chili. We sampled Rockabilly Bear Butt Savory Stew. We even risked tasting a mysterious, somewhat unnerving dish known only as Wilderness Surprise that actually tasted pretty good and didn’t send me running for the porta-potties as I feared it might. All of the Miss WV Roadkill pageant winners mingled with the crowd, their crowns and sashes sparkling as they ate.

My portion of a chicken noodle soup-like dish called Get Yer-Self a Huzband Hillbilly Burgoo had some sort of whisker or bristle in it, but hey, maybe the potential husbands the lady chefs wanted to attract appreciate



that kind of authenticity. It worked on the judges, at least—they awarded the burgoo top honors, and the local high school’s venison chili won the People’s Choice award.

As the tasting period drew to a close, I pulled out my camera to get a few shots of team Lucky Ducks’ offering of duck meatballs and vegetarian chili. A suspicious kid behind the table slanted me a sideways look. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Just taking pictures,” I replied.

With one eyebrow still raised, he clearly wasn’t convinced. “You’re not trying to steal our recipe, are you?”