

The perfect game stew (and pie) – recipe

It's the height of game season, so it's cheap, plentiful and the ideal choice for a warming autumn stew – just top with pastry to turn it into pie



It's that time of year when the British countryside echoes with the sound of shotguns and scolded spaniels, when almost everything furred and feathered that has a season is in season, and can be picked up, often surprisingly cheaply, from farm shops, markets and game dealers.

Though the **game industry is certainly not perfect**, as an omnivore my preference is to eat a wild or semi-wild animal from **a sustainable, environmentally responsible source** – not always a given with game – than one that's spent its entire life in captivity. Feel free to tell me I'm wrong below the line.

Thankfully, the days of birds being hung so long that they turned green are largely a thing of the past, but game's full flavour is still infinitely more interesting than most intensively farmed meat. This free-range lifestyle does mean that cooking it can be a bit of a culinary Russian roulette. A pheasant is a **fine thing to roast**, but if you have your suspicions that it might not be in the first flush of youth, you're better off opting for low and slow in a stew that can, on high days and holidays, be easily turned into a pie. Perfect for autumnal dinners, with a side of root veg and bitter brassicas – and some sloe gin for pudding.

The meat

The nature of game season means you're more likely to end up with whatever's been unfortunate enough to find itself in front of the guns that weekend than to pick and choose as if you're in a supermarket. So though I try recipes using pheasant, wood pigeon, partridge and rabbit, it doesn't seem to make sense to dictate the specifics. I will, nevertheless, pass on the advice from the west London butcher **C Lidgate** to use equal parts "dark meat, such as venison leg or shoulder, mallard duck

and wild boar, along with paler game (pheasant, rabbit and suchlike)” if possible – it’s just more interesting.

If you start with whole birds, as Gary Rhodes suggests in his underrated [New British Classics](#), you will need to take the breasts off the bone, though I wouldn’t bother boning the legs: life’s too short, so chuck them all into the pot. This method allows you to make a game stock with the carcasses, which can be used in the gravy, so it has its benefits despite the extra work involved. That said, most game dealers sell bags of mixed game that are ideal for the purpose.

Rhodes marinates the meat for 24 hours in a heady mixture of reduced red wine, port, brandy and aromatics, but I’m not sure it’s a coincidence that much of the breast meat becomes mealy and dry: [Harold McGee](#) [says](#) that after about two hours, the acid in such marinades starts to adversely affect the texture of the meat, which I suspect is what happened here.

[Jane Grigson](#) [poaches the birds in water or stock](#) in the English game pie recipe in her masterwork, *English Food*, then breaks the flesh into large chunks; *Clarissa Dickson Wright* pot-roasts them. Both yield surprisingly tender meat. But the best results of all are the simplest: [Lidgate’s: The Meat Cookbook](#) simply drops it all raw into the casserole, and [Claire Macdonald’s Game Cookbook](#) flours it and browns it first. For some – slightly counterintuitive – reason, Macdonald’s is the least dry of all, so that’s what I’m going with.

Lidgate’s also says that “the other trick is to use the best smoked bacon you can buy – the stronger the smoke, the better. As it cooks, it combines with the other ingredients to release a magical, wintry aroma.” I reckon they’re right, but that’s as much for the fat it releases as for the smoky flavour, which goes so well with game – a notoriously lean ingredient that can do with all the help it can get. I’d recommend frying the bacon to render the fat, then scooping it out and adding it to the pot towards the end of cooking, so it doesn’t end up flabby and sad. Grigson recommends serving it in “little rolls”, which feel festive and have the benefit of being big enough to pack a real punch.

The gravy

This is arguably even more important than the meat – a stew without gravy is, well, if not a tragedy, then certainly not a stew. All the recipes I try make liberal use of red wine and stock, for either game or chicken, with the exception of Grigson’s, which uses pheasant poaching liquid and leaves out the booze altogether for a white sauce that, though

delicious, reminds me and my testers of a chicken and mushroom pie.

Game seems to demand something richer and fuller bodied.

That said, **Dickson Wright's 15th century-inspired recipe** packs almost too much of a punch: the sauce is so thick that it's more like a relish than a gravy. Rhodes goes slightly too far the other way: having marinated the meat in an entire bottle of claret and other alcohols overnight, he cooks it in this marinade and homemade game stock – which also includes a bottle of red. It's delicious, but “more like a coq au vin”, apparently. Certainly it lacks the meaty depth of Macdonald's and Lidgate's sauces, which contain more modest amounts of wine and stock.

They also both thicken their sauces with flour, which I think is essential for a proper gravy: a jus, the kind of thing liable to run off your plate while you're helping yourself to mash, is not satisfactory here. If you'd prefer to keep it gluten-free, use arrowroot or cornflour instead.

The vegetables

Meat stews need vegetables like a martini needs a garnish – you can do without in extremis, but it's a bit dull. Mushrooms are popular with game, possibly for reasons of seasonal synergy, which pleases me more than the fungi – though I can see they offer textural interest, so I allow myself to be overruled by my more mushroom-tolerant testers. Carrots are always a good addition to give sweetness to meaty things. The same goes for onions, and, against my better judgment, having spent 15 minutes peeling the tricky little things, I'm going to use the whole small ones specified by Rhodes. Macdonald's shallots will probably be easier to find and work just as well. Leaving the onions intact prevents them disappearing into the sauce during cooking.

I don't think the sauce needs garlic, and Rhodes' celery feels more savoury than the stew needs – most game is emphatically savoury (as opposed to the sweetness of, say, lamb or pork), so I'd prefer to keep the gravy a little softer.

The aromatics

Dickson Wright's medieval recipe is packed with glorious spices: cloves, cinnamon, ginger, white pepper and saffron, plus a teaspoon of sugar – not exactly what my testers are expecting from a game stew, admittedly (“Is this a tagine?”), but a happy reminder of what passed for British food before boiled beef and cabbage. Instead, I'll be opting for the more usual combination of juniper berries, for their faintly foresty notes, thyme and bay – all herbaceous flavours that seem fitting with game.

I'll also be adding Rhodes' redcurrant jelly, though Macdonald's bramble jelly or Lidgate's cranberry sauce would also supply the requisite fruity notes. It shouldn't need his red wine vinegar, however, or Macdonald's Worcestershire sauce ("only Lea & Perrins will do, because it contains the vital ingredient of anchovy", she explains): too tangy for my liking, though if you think it tastes a bit flat, either might well come to the rescue.

The cooking method

Dickson Wright's birds are gently braised in a relatively small amount of liquid, but everyone else simmers their meat in more copious amounts of gravy, which suits my plans just fine. Though it's perfectly possible to get a good result on the hob, I always prefer, like Rhodes and Macdonald, to cook stews in a moderate oven: it's easier to keep the temperature constant that way and harder to overcook the meat and dry it out.

The pastry

If you'd like to turn the stew into a pie, allow it to cool completely, then cover it with pastry. Grigson reckons that "many people prefer a good shortcrust with meat", but my testers disagree. Macdonald's puff pastry proves much more popular in this instance, though Rhodes' rough puff would be just as delicious, if you have a yen to make your own.

Perfect game stew (and pie)

Prep **35 min**

Cook **75 min (115 min + cooling if making a pie)**

Serves **6**

25g butter

100g smoked streaky bacon rashers, rolled up

8 small onions or shallots, trimmed and peeled

2 sprigs fresh thyme

1 bay leaf

6 juniper berries, roughly crushed

1kg boned game, cut into 4cm chunks – ideally a mix of dark and light game

2 tbsp flour

Salt and black pepper

200ml full-bodied red wine

400ml good chicken or game stock

75g redcurrant jelly

2 carrots, cut into 1cm chunks

150g small mushrooms

To make it into a pie (optional)

500g puff pastry
1 egg, beaten



Brown the bacon – roll it up, so it doesn't disappear into the sauce later. Heat the oven to 150C/300F/gas 2. Heat the butter in a casserole dish over a medium-high flame, then fry the rolled up bacon, turning regularly, until golden and the fat renders out. Lift out and set aside.



Remove the bacon, then fry the onions and herbs. Put the onions, with the thyme, bay and juniper berries, in the pot and fry until golden, then lift out and set aside in a separate dish.



Brown the meat in batches, then deglaze the pot with wine. Dust the meat with flour and a pinch of salt and pepper. Fry in batches, being careful not to overcrowd the pan, adding more butter (or oil) if necessary, until well browned on all sides. Lift out and set aside with the onions.



Return the meat and onions to the pot, and add stock.

Add the wine to the pan and scrape the bottom, then add the stock and stir in the redcurrant jelly to dissolve it. Bring to a simmer, then return the onions, herbs and game to the pot. Cover and put in the oven for 45 minutes, then stir in the carrots and mushrooms, and return to the oven, covered, for 15 minutes. Arrange the bacon on top, leave the lid ajar and bake for another 30 minutes.



After 45 minutes, add the carrots and mushrooms, and cook for 15 minutes more.

Test the meat – it should be tender – season to taste and serve with root veg and mash.



Finally, pop the bacon on top for the finished game stew.

If you want to turn the stew into a pie, leave the meat to cool completely, then tip into a pie dish. Roll out the pastry on a lightly floured surface, then cover the pie, pressing it down on to the rim of the dish to seal. Snip a few small holes in the pastry to allow steam to escape, brush all over with the beaten egg and bake at 200C/390F/gas 6 for 30-40 minutes, until golden.



Or pop some puff pastry on top and turn it into game pie.

- Game: love it or hate it? Why don't we eat more of it in this country?

And, game lovers, what recipes would you recommend to convert the sceptics?