
FARMGIRL ANGST

BY MARILEE FOSTER

WHY I HUNT

For a long time I was confused—is it “cold” crops, or “cole” crops that they are saying? My parents got into cauliflower when I was about six. A fall cauliflower crop gets planted in mid- to late-July, during a lull in the potato-growing season. The farm’s entire crew—including us kids and whatever friends we had kicking around—went out to transplant. I remember this being lots of fun, but the harvest, agonizingly, was not. When it came time to cut it, crate it, sell it, the crew was already busy with the potato harvest. It was just mom and us. Cauliflower was less fun at 6 a.m., with frost soaking our clothes, gloveless little hands growing red and cold, catching each head she threw, my mother swung her machete, *whack*, she swung again, *whiff*, she trimmed off the leaves, and then here it came, an enormous head hurdling our way, as the sun just barely crept into an icy dawn. Cold crops it was.

Beyond this memory I have come to favor fall crops. They are heartier, slower growing and less stressful than the coveted fruits of midsummer. If, in the height of summer, you didn’t have time to can, the cool offerings would keep coming—if not improving—long after a killing frost. I would be satisfied to stop here but the miracle of this region does not; there is yet one more harvest to consider. It doesn’t need to be put by, picked, or dried, but it does need to be hunted for. And hunting isn’t easy—to do or defend—in our protein-rich world.

I grew up in a house where every primary corner of the kitchen is marked with graphite lines. The lines are from gun barrels and resurface even with new paint. There are two kinds of hunting. One, called “sport,” might entail men’s clubs, traditions and cocktails at high noon. The other kind of hunting, the one farmers engage in, is called “farming.” For purposes of practice a farmer might hunt for sport, but the reason those corners look the way they do is that for people who live off the land, the land will also live off you. Farmers hunt at the drop of a hat—out of urgency or opportunity—for the fox who is angling for the chickens (suddenly in the yard) or a lettuce-fed deer who is loping across the back forty. A gun, never loaded, must always be handy.



My most memorable meals are the ones composed of ingredients that come entirely of this place. When we butchered my roosters, and made coq au vin, one bite into the meal, I pushed back from the table and pronounced that everything save the mushrooms was from here; from the wine to the oily garlic cloves, each flavor stood out as the colors in a painting might. It was robust in the most delicate way. We toasted and toasted and toasted, until somebody said, “Wait, no, where did the butter come from?” Having homegrown meat at a homegrown meal will convert a morally opposed vegetarian to a person who eats meat in certain situations. Having meat that’s been harvested fair and square can turn a person who just doesn’t like red meat into someone eager to try it again.

I know my enthusiasm for fresh cervidae has increased proportionate to the extent I feed them. Radicchio, fillet beans, patty-pan squash. They eat as well as my best customers, and yet they needn’t leave a cent. Hunting, for a farmer, is part of the economy. Last week we had our first fall venison, tenderloin on the grill. We feasted with garlic mashed potatoes, roasted beets and carrots, and a salad that undressed your mouth with mineral simplicity. The whole meal was rich. I’d never had deer as unadulterated as this. The gaminess to which some diners will protest must be handled properly as to not void the meat of its regional character. In every few bites I caught the slightest hint of Sagg Pond in my mouth. □