

The Urban Deerslayer

By Sean Patrick Farrell

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The call to forge deeper connections with the food we eat has pulled thousands to the nation's farmers' markets, sprouted a million backyard seedlings and jump-started an interest in scratch baking, canning and other county-fair pursuits.

Now add hunting to the list. Novice urban hunters are forming classes and clubs to learn skills that a few generations ago were often passed down from parent to child.

Jackson Landers, an insurance broker by day, teaches a course here called Deer Hunting for Locavores. Mr. Landers, 31, started the classes earlier this year for largely urban adults who, like him, did not grow up stalking prey but have gravitated to harvesting and cooking their own game.

He tailored his course to food-obsessed city people with lessons on deer biology, habitat and anatomy, and rounded out his students' education with field trips to a firing range to practice shooting and a session on butchery and cooking. One of the last lessons covered field dressing a freshly killed deer. As the students gathered around, Mr. Landers produced a hunting knife and explained its gut-hook feature, which promised to open the deer "like a zipper."

"I'd never fired a gun before," said Michael Davis, 44, a graphic designer and a student in the class. "I grew up in Southern California. We surfed, we didn't hunt."

But Mr. Davis, a self-described foodie, said he needed to understand what it means to hunt for food.

"I think going through my life without at least experiencing that most primal thing of hunting would be cheating," he said.

It was a taste for wild boar that spurred Nick Zigelbaum, 26, and Nick Chaset, 27, to form a hunting and dining club in San Francisco that they call the Bull Moose Hunting Society. The society, founded in 2007, was designed to appeal to young urban residents looking to expand their horizons.

The club now has roughly 55 dues-paying members, many of them in their 20s and 30s, who hunt for boar, pheasant and waterfowl together. They share local hunting knowledge and the spoils of a good day in the field at semi-regular events they call boar-b-ques and wild food dinners.

Mr. Chaset, who is now attending graduate business school in Washington, D.C., recently established a chapter of the club there. The founders hope that someday they'll have a chapter in every major American urban area.

Nationwide, the number of hunters has been in decline for decades. The country's shift from rural to urban life is the main reason, said Mark Damian Duda, executive director of Responsive Management, a survey and research firm that specializes in natural resources and outdoor recreation issues.

According to his firm's research, only 22 percent of hunters now say they hunt primarily for food. Most say they do so for recreation or to spend time with their families.

"Thirty years ago it was about half the hunters who were hunting for food," Mr. Duda said.

The connection never completely faded, though. Some American chefs who grew up with rifles in their hands have long been passionate about wild game, even if the law forbids them from serving it in their restaurants. The subject has also been taken up recently by the writers Michael Pollan, who shoots a wild boar in "The Omnivore's Dilemma," and Steven Rinella, who chronicled his quest to kill a wild American bison in "American Buffalo." But until recently, tree stands and Mossy Oak camouflage were rarely mentioned in the same breath as, say, heirloom tomatoes.

Anthony Licata, editor of Field & Stream magazine, said he wasn't surprised that a new generation of eaters was discovering what traditional hunters have known all along: "There's nothing more organic and free range than meat you hunt for yourself and your family," he said.

Mr. Licata, who is 35 and lives in New Jersey, said he thought interest in hunting among young urban locavores was bound to grow. "When you do hunt and if you're lucky enough to fill your freezer with venison and feed your family, it's a powerful thing," he said. "They aren't going to want to stop."

Mr. Landers, who tries to take Virginia's full limit of six deer a year, agreed. For the cost of the necessary licenses, \$36.50, he said he can stock his freezer with nearly free protein.

He also argued that for the environmentally conscious, hunting is fairly carbon neutral.

"If you can shoot a deer in your own backyard, butcher it there, that's zero food miles," he said.