

A man wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat, a red and black plaid shirt over an orange t-shirt, and blue jeans stands in a garden. He is holding a wooden rifle with a scope. The garden is filled with various plants, including purple flowers and green leafy vegetables. In the background, a wooden building is visible.

# Gardening with a Gun

Locavores—some of them ex-vegetarians—are adding organic, free-range game meat to their fall harvest.

By Tom Dickson. Photos by Paul Queneau.

**READY TO HARVEST** Greg Price, who manages a farm in Missoula, represents a new breed of hunter in Montana and across the United States. “Hunting for me fits perfectly with my previous experience of raising and canning my own fruits and vegetables with my own hands,” he says.



Greg Price of Missoula didn't shout with joy when he killed his first big game animal, a mule deer doe in the Blackfoot Valley in 2008. "I definitely had mixed emotions when I saw it lying there dead," says the 47-year-old hunter, who manages a farm that raises vegetables for nonprofit organizations. "But then I started thinking about all that meat I had just harvested, on my own, and started to sense a deep emotional satisfaction."



Other new hunters in Montana and across the United States are also feeling the warm glow that comes with procuring their own venison. From Oregon to New York, more and more people are adding game meat to their pantries, part of a growing locavore movement that emphasizes eating healthier food grown and harvested closer to home. Fueling the trend are book authors and TV personalities who tout the health and ethics of eating only what they themselves kill.

Seemingly from out of nowhere, hunting animals for meat has suddenly become not just acceptable, but hip.

#### Locavore movement

Choosing organic meat and vegetables over mass-produced, chemically enhanced foods is nothing new. But the notion of eating only "locally sourced" food took off in the early 2000s as an outgrowth of the rapidly growing public interest in organics. Locavores (the word is derived from "local" and the Latin word for "devour") strive to grow and raise their food themselves, then purchase the rest grown and raised as close as possible to where they live. Concern about animal welfare and the energy needed to import food from faraway places are other locavore motivations.

For all these reasons, says Price, he decided to add a rifle to his food-harvesting implements. Previously a vegetarian, he began eating meat 18 years ago when a friend offered him a grilled elk steak. He

started hunting eight years later and has since harvested several deer and elk. "Hunting for me fits perfectly with my previous experience of raising and canning my own fruits and vegetables with my own hands," he says.

Price has since shown other Missoula locavores how to hunt and track animals. "Many people who move to Montana come from the suburbs of the Midwest or East," he says. "They may want to hunt for meat but don't have any experience with it, not having grown up here. Having a mentor is a huge help."

#### The urban hunter

The popularization of hunting as an ethical and logical extension of the locavore philosophy started in 2006 with Michael Pollan's bestselling *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. The book included an account by the self-described liberal-minded "indoorsman" of hunting and killing a wild boar, which he and a friend then butchered and turned into smoked hams, prosciutto, and bacon. After Pollan came a slew of other books that touted hunting as a way to obtain free-range, humanely harvested meat. In *Girl Hunter*,

Georgia Pellegrini tells of killing domestic turkeys for a restaurant where she worked as a chef, and soon finding herself "going one step farther down this path, away from the grocery aisle and into the wild." Lily Raff McCaulou, author of *Call of the Mild*, lived in New York City before moving to Bend, Oregon, and becoming a hunter in order to feel more connected to her meals and the land. "You'd be hard-pressed to find an unlikelier hunter than me," she writes. "I'm a woman, and married to a man who does not hunt. I grew up in a city, terrified of guns."

In *The Mindful Carnivore*, vegetarian-turned-hunter Tovar Cerulli eventually realized that because "some harm to animals was inevitable in even the gentlest forms of agriculture, integrity and alignment could only come from taking responsibility for at least a portion of that killing." Virginian Jackson Landers, author of *The Beginner's Guide to Hunting Deer for Food*, was born into a vegetarian household but today teaches workshops on locavore hunting and home butchering. He wrote his book for "the urban man or woman who loves meat but thinks that there might be more to that

whole world than just a bovine steak wrapped in plastic."

One of the most influential chefs-turned-hunter is San Francisco-based Hank Shaw, whose award-winning blog *Hunter Angler Gardener Cook* lists more than 100 recipes for game dishes along with essays on hunting and the ethics of killing wild animals.

Another pop culture hunting presence is TV personality Andrew Zimmern, host of the Travel Channel's popular *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern*. Also a spokesman for Target and General Mills, Zimmern told *Petersen's Hunting* that he hopes his pro-hunting message sells. "I sort of see my hunting life, as documented on television and so forth, as a gateway for my audience," he said. Further spreading the "eat what you kill" philosophy is Joe Rogan, actor, TV host, and author of the widely popular *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast. Rogan started hunting three years ago when Steve Rinella, host of the Sportsman Channel's *MeatEater*, invited him to hunt mule deer in the Missouri Breaks of central Montana. "I've eaten meat all my life, but I had never bridged the disconnect between a living animal becoming food," Rogan later wrote on his blog. "I've always let other people do the work for me, and for a long time I've contemplated that this disconnect is

probably not only mentally unhealthy but dishonest as well."

Hunting for food received its highest profile endorsement when Facebook co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced in 2011 that the only meat he would eat for a year would be from animals he killed himself. "I think many people forget that a living being has to die for you to eat meat," he told *Fortune*, "so my goal revolves around not letting myself forget that and being thankful for what I have." In addition to killing a sheep, pig, and chickens, Zuckerberg reportedly acquired a license and shot a bison, whereabouts unknown.

#### Hunter numbers up

The growing popularity of hunting for food may have also boosted hunter numbers after decades of decline. According to U.S. Census surveys, participation in hunting had dropped during the 1990s and early 2000s, from 14.1 million in 1991 to 12.5 million in 2006. But then, surprisingly, numbers rose more than 9 percent in the next five years, to 13.7 million. (Montana's hunting numbers during the past 15 years since FWP began accurate tracking have remained steady, though declining slightly per capita.)

Why this nationwide uptick, the first in 25 years? According to a national survey of

1,000 hunters published last year by Responsive Management, a research firm specializing in outdoors issues, the number of hunters hunting for meat more than doubled from 16 percent in 2006 to 35 percent in 2011. Some of that could be due to the recession. But part also could be due to the growing locavore movement as well as more female hunters, say research analysts with the firm.

The total number of women hunters grew by 25 percent between 2006 and 2011, after holding steady for a decade, according to Census Bureau statistics. At last count, 11 percent of all U.S. hunters were women, compared to 9 percent in 2006. A recent survey by Responsive Management found that women are twice as likely as men to list "for the meat" as their primary motivation for hunting.

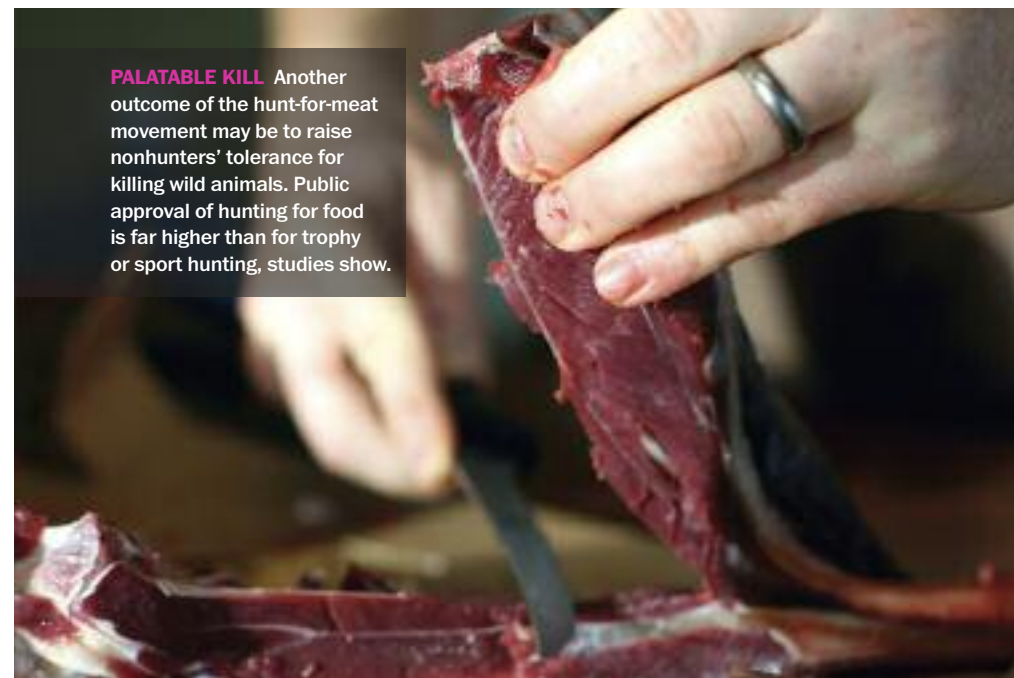
The growth in gun-toting gardeners may also make hunting more palatable to the nonhunting public. A study by Responsive Management in 2006 found that, of American adults nationwide, the highest approval rating for hunting (86 percent) was when it was done for meat. The lowest approval rating (28 percent) was hunting for trophies. The study meshes with another survey conducted in 1980, when Stephen Kellert of Yale University found that the general public was far more likely to support the killing of game animals to obtain food rather than for sport or to put a rack or pelt on the wall.

It was certainly meat, not antlers, that attracted Joe Naiman-Sessions, of Helena, to hunting. Five years ago he moved to the West from Florida, "and got into the healthy agriculture movement and thinking about what people were putting into their bodies," he says. He began gardening and then started raising and slaughtering chickens for food. "I soon saw hunting as a logical extension of all that," he says.

Last winter Naiman-Sessions took the FWP Hunter Education course, and he recently bought a big game rifle. On opening day he'll be in the field with a friend who has offered to show him the ropes. "I'm looking forward to learning how to stalk and track deer and elk," the 30-year-old neophyte hunter says, "but my main goal is to stock my freezer with ethically harvested and sustainable organic meat." 🐾



**READ 'EM AND EAT** Michael Pollan's bestseller *The Omnivore's Dilemma* came out in 2006, quickly followed by a series of other books extolling the healthy and culinary benefits of hunting.



**PALATABLE KILL** Another outcome of the hunt-for-meat movement may be to raise nonhunters' tolerance for killing wild animals. Public approval of hunting for food is far higher than for trophy or sport hunting, studies show.

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