

Hunting in Hill Country

GEORGIA PELLEGRINI
photographs by TERRY ALLEN



Enjoying the sporting paradise
of
Joshua Creek Ranch

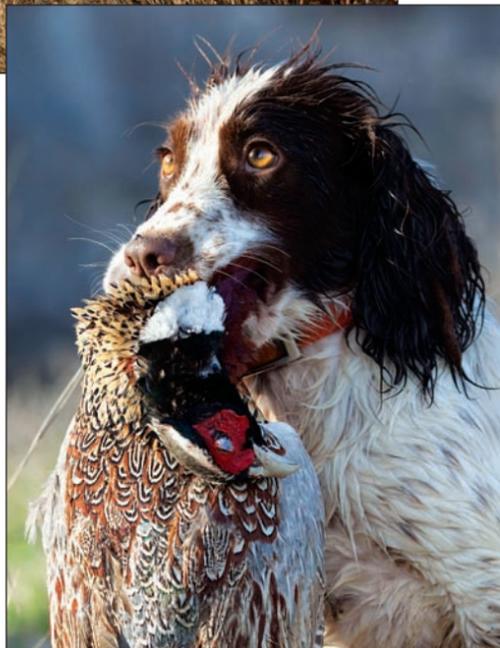


There are those experiences that you want to repeat, the memory of which is reassuring. They are the kind you wish will stick like beer-battered pheasant to your ribs. Texas Hill Country is a foreign land to me: 1,400 feet high, lush and green, bugless save for the crickets and dragonflies, and cooler than nearby San Antonio. Such country could be in many places—a small town in Martha Stewart's Connecticut with perfectly coiffed horse fences or the hills of Marin County, California, where the air is slightly damp and smells of burning wood and the roads are dirt. But this Hill Country is in Texas, slightly north of San Antonio, between a town called Welfare and one called Comfort. There lies a ranch on Joshua Creek.

There are blazing-red cypress trees that line up like soldiers along the creek, turning the water crimson. There are amber waves of tall grass that blur in a band of perpetual motion and pheasants that dart in and out of the brush. To the north the quail flit faster than the dragonflies, and to the south sounds of prized dogs fill the air, yelping at the feeding hour after a day spent finding and pointing birds.

I am here for a "media event" at Joshua Creek Ranch—one of five properties in the US included in the Beretta Trident program, a kind of Michelin guide for hunters that rates hunting destinations and bestows upon them one to three tridents. It is an indicator of the experience a hunter might have if she chose to visit a particular place.

Cocktail hour is at 6:45 in the owners' residence, where I am greeted by an African lion frozen in time in a



A combination of pointing and flushing dogs enhance the wingshooting experience in the beautiful Texas Hill Country.

menacing pose. On the veranda a stone fireplace burns, mimicking the melting sunset and warming the flagstones beneath our feet. The chef appears with a dimpled silver platter of axis venison carpaccio, purple and sweet and bejeweled with vegetable confetti. Across from me a man sits in a chair made of branches, poised with his notebook, a tad bewildered and out of his element. Another sits languidly on a stone bench, his back to the fire, sipping a merlot.

Past the veranda, the sky turns into a purple bruise. A woman sits calmly with a pleased smile, her hair velvet black and shiny, here jewelry reflecting and blending with the new evening stars.

This is a place where money and tradition collide—where descendents of the 500-year-old maestro Bartolomeo Beretta dynasty in Brescia, Italy, mingle with newer dynasties from the American Southwest.

There are many components to this place. In part it is a library that holds classic books and photographs from a hunting honeymoon in Africa and sterling magnifying glasses purposefully placed on a leather-bound desk with its rich mahogany legs nestled into a finely embroidered rug. If you are lucky, someone will lift their hand to one of the shelves and pull back a panel to reveal another door leading to a chamber. A code will be typed onto the handle of the door, and



The lodge at Joshua Creek provides a wonderful atmosphere for enjoying a fine meal and reliving the hunt.

you will enter a room the size of a small Manhattan apartment where the interior walls are lined with vintage shotguns—McKay Browns with gorgeous walnut stocks, Parkers, delicate and rare quail guns, a 16-gauge Bosis. The guns feature hunting scenes brought to life by countless hours of fine engraving; engraving so fine that the ducks seem to spring from the steel, the dogs threaten to run off the locks and even leaves of the trees seem to stir in the wind.

When we return from the secret chamber, we sit for dinner in a well-paneled room, another grand fireplace warming our backs and a Texas-size chandelier reflecting the candlelight. We eat pork roast and cranberries, a spicy butternut squash, and chocolate soufflé with a sugar crust top. Someone tells the story of hunting a "real pissed off" leopard in Africa and of how the leopard was actually hunting him the whole time while the bushmen spoke in their language of clicks as they chased the cat through the grass. The stories are told amongst a gallery of bobcats

and leopards watching from nearby, their muscles poised taut for eternity.

"When I'm sitting with men around a fire," says one man, "we often ask ourselves, *What is it about this that we like so much?* And the truth is that we're going back. Even though we eat the nice food and wear the nice clothing now, it was only two or three generations ago that this is how we provided food for our families. Now we just have places like HEB grocery. But with hunting there is still the camaraderie, a series of beautiful things that bonds you. The people you hunt with will always take your call."

In the morning I walk along the Guadalupe River through bluestem grass and live oaks. This place is a protected habitat, resplendent with grasses of all types: clump grass with good seed that the birds love, red-top grass, milo and coastal hay.

I arrive at a field with a gamekeeper. English setters, pointers and Brittanys yelp from their crates in the back of a

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BRAISED CHUKAR LEGS WITH CABBAGE AND GRAPES



Unlike farmyard birds, wild birds have muscular legs that lend themselves well to braising. Each bird will vary, depending on variety and age, but the key is to cook them low and slow until the meat is tender and falls off of the bone. A good braising green or vegetable can be substituted for the cabbage.

- 8 chukar legs
- 2 tbs flour
- 2 tbs butter
- ¼ cup onion, diced
- 2 cups cabbage, finely sliced
- 1 cup seedless grapes, crushed
- ¼ cup brandy
- 2 cups bird stock
- 2 tbs freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 tbs parsley, minced
- Salt & pepper

1. Rinse and pat dry the legs, and season on both sides with salt & pepper. Dust both sides with flour.
 2. In a sauté pan melt the butter until it begins to bubble. Add the legs, skin side down, and cook until golden brown, about 4 minutes. Turn over for about 1 minute, then remove the meat to a platter.
 3. In the same pan add the onions and cabbage and sauté until soft and brown, about 5 minutes.
 4. Add the grapes and stir. Add the legs, brown side up, and nestle them into the cabbage and onions.
 5. Add the brandy, and light with a match. Let the alcohol burn off and reduce.
 6. Add the stock, partially cover with a lid and cook at a very low simmer for about 1 hour, or until the meat falls off the bone.
 7. Finish with lemon juice and parsley and more salt & pepper to taste.
- Serves 4

Also try grouse, partridge, pheasant, pigeon, prairie chicken, ptarmigan, quail, rail, snipe, duck, goose, turkey, squirrel, rabbit.

—GP

truck, eager to begin their task of finding birds. Lacy, a seven-year-old English cocker, walks beside us waiting for Brittanys Stan and Rock to point her in the right direction. When instructed to, “Hunt ’em up, Lacy,” she dashes forward, the nub of her tail wagging, and weaves in and out of the grass until the birds fly up and shots ring out.

I bring a 28-gauge Beretta to my cheek again and again as I make my way through a box of No. 6s and the air begins to smell of smoking shells. Everyone is silent as Lacy weaves. I watch with my arms alert and my heart beating just a little faster. A large tin bath of water has been set in the field for the dogs to cool the Texas sun off their backs. Lacy jumps in and out in one fluid motion. The pointers follow suit, shake and spray without missing a step and continue searching. There are hawks flying above me, eyeing their competition. They already have broken up the coveys and caused the birds to scatter, and the dogs now set out to find each one. There are pheasants with their long tendril tails and quail so small and fast that my eyes mix them with the dragonflies. When I shoot, sometimes one falls and sometimes one doesn’t. What I really want, though, is a chukar—a native of southern Eurasia brought from Pakistan to the US to be a gamebird. I have not tasted chukar, and the first one that flushes to my side I miss.

After a lunch of meat, peach cobbler and iced tea, we begin hunting with another English setter named Tramp. She is black and seems almost shy, and she weaves in and out and brings the birds up demurely. There are birds everywhere—so many birds now—but still no chukar appear.

I walk the red rows with a swirl of dogs in front of me, weaving and embroidering the grass. My wool tweed jacket holds in all of the afternoon heat and wets my back, and the dogs continue to weave and stitch, their tongues hanging out in short breaths of expectation. I walk, observing all of the noises flowing in and out of the grasses—whirring, cackling, mysterious and always real.

And then at last, in the iridescent trickles of an afternoon sun, an olive-brown figure rises from the left only 10 yards in front and crosses my path in a diagonal leap skyward. And with one quick shot, my chukar gives unto me. Tramp re-

GEORGIA PELLEGRINI: GIRL HUNTER

Georgia Pellegrini developed an appreciation for fishing, growing and foraging for food while growing up in New York’s Hudson Valley. She attended Wellesley College and then Harvard University, and then worked briefly on Wall Street.

Realizing that the world of finance was feeding her bank account but not her soul, she left to attend the French Culinary Institute, in New York City. After graduating at the top of her class, she worked in two of New York’s most esteemed farm-to-table restaurants—Gramercy Tavern and Blue Hill at Stone Barns—as well as in La Chassagnette, in France.

It was here that Pellegrini learned to harvest both plants and meat for the meals she was preparing. She became very interested in foraging and collecting and in the people who craft food in traditional ways. She began writing about them. Her first book, *Food Heroes*, tells their stories. It was released last fall to wide acclaim.

The next step in Pellegrini’s food quest was to head to the source: Mother Nature. She bought a shotgun and learned to use it, and then set about pursuing gamebirds that would serve well as table fare. In a short time she has covered a lot of ground, hunting throughout the US and taking species such as pheasants, quail, chukar, grouse, partridge, various ducks and more. She has also enjoyed driven shooting in England. The stories of her adventures and close to 100 recipes for game (including not only the entrees but also sauces and stocks) will be included in her second book, *Girl Hunter*, due out in December from Da Capo Press.

Pellegrini also has a food blog (<http://georgiapellegrini.com>), and she contributed to the cookbook *Hunter’s Harvest*, recently produced by Joshua Creek Ranch. According to Pellegrini: “I currently roam the world hunting and gathering, tasting good food, and meeting the good people who make it. In any given city, on any given day, you can find me posted up in a café with my shotgun and a glass of rosé.”

—The Editors



The author (left) and Ann Kercheville, president and co-founder of Joshua Creek Ranch and a fine cook in her own right.

trieves it, and I hold the bird in my hand. It has a buff-colored belly, bold black and chestnut barring on its flanks, and black lines circling the contours of its eyes, all flowing down its neck and into its chest toward a white throat, covering the span between a red bill and legs.

The guttural chirping sounds of the fields repeat in my mind all evening, as do the images of the men I saw fishing the Guadalupe River on my way to the fields—men stringing up bass, bluegills and catfish. I hear it all as I sit at the stone fire pit and contemplate how I will cook the chukar and taste it for the first time. 🦋

Author’s Note: For more information on hunting in Texas, contact Joshua Creek Ranch, 830-537-5090; www.joshuacreek.com

Georgia Pellegrini is a chef who lives in New York and Austin, Texas. She operates a food, travel, lifestyle and hunting Website at <http://georgiapellegrini.com>. Pellegrini is the author of the book Food Heroes, and her new book, Girl Hunter, is scheduled to be released this fall and is available for pre-order wherever books are sold.