



Venison

RICHES

By LIZ BLOOD | Art by NATASHA ALTERICI

ALL TOLD, THE venison liver mousse fed sixteen people. I transformed the nearly twenty-four-ounce organ into the mousse and a liver-and-onions entrée late on a Friday. The mousse stretched until the following Thursday, when my extended family polished it off along with a dwindling supply of *crostini* moments ahead of our Thanksgiving meal. It was a delight—smooth, buttery, spiced, and unlike anything I’d eaten in a long time.

On rare occasions as a kid, I ate what is called country pâté (*pâté de campagne*). It’s typically made of blended pork, pork fat, and other meats and offal—like liver. My mother purchased it from the French grocery in Oklahoma City and served it around the holidays or when my uncle visited from Atlanta. My three siblings loathed pâté when we were young, but I thought if I liked it, I would be advanced in some way. So I set out to develop a taste. (In later years, I did the same thing with beer, though I am less proud of that.)

In *Swann’s Way*, the first volume of Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator, a young man, bites into a madeleine he has just soaked in tea. All of a sudden, some earlier childhood self is—in a flash—resurrected.

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than

a shiver ran through me and I stopped . . . An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me . . . this new sensation having had the effect . . . of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me.

Proust is conveying a eucharistic moment during an otherwise desperate time. He was transformed by the sustenance at hand.

As someone whose life has been shaped by the narrative of food—as a child with a wonderful cook for a mother, as an adult who carries those traditions and stories forward, as a voracious reader of cookbooks and food writing—it nonetheless surprised me when the thought to make liver mousse popped into my head. I had only to run out of the house to buy whole milk and brandy. The rest of the ingredients are fairly regular in my kitchen: shallots, garlic, eggs, olive oil, spices, flour, and butter. But there was the thought, almost transportive, presented by the availability of a liver. As Julia Child wrote in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*: “The memory of a good French pâté can haunt you for years.”

But I was haunted also by the giant animal organ in my refrigerator and the attendant responsibility of not letting it go to waste. The Sunday prior, my husband Will

Initiation

By Jessica B. Isaacs

we stood around your first kill,
a pack of coyotes wild in the woods,
the deer dead at our feet

we circled and poked it,
carnivores licking our chops,
a dance of dominion, of man

we didn’t need the meat

returned from a trip near the Spavinaw Hills State Game Refuge, and we were suddenly one deer richer. Before his arrival, he sent a few excited text messages with photos of his kill.

His kill are words that are difficult to say or type. It feels strange—food coupled with murder is just more complicated to enjoy. I like to think I am, as writer Trinie Dalton puts it, “a person for whom the story of food is as exuberant as the eating.” But wishing to participate in the juiciness of the tale is often messy because food—especially that of the animal variety—is messy.

For us, eating deer means spending time outside—where the deer run and sleep, where they find morel mushrooms (usually, irritatingly before we do) and gnaw off their tops, and where they die. It’s hallowed ground. Eating deer also means protecting Oklahoma wildlife so the deer have a place to exist. In that same landscape, we forage for oyster and wood ear mushrooms, fish for crappie, and pick an occasional wild berry.

I did not kill the deer or field dress it and so am removed from that process—but it was described to me in detail by the person next to whom I sleep every night. That Will spent time on his knees with a dying animal in order to feed us is a thought I hold with some mixture of reverence, sadness, and gratitude.

I did make the mousse, which necessitated trimming the liver into thin pieces my blender could pulverize. Liver, a bloody, wet organ, jiggles like molded Jell-O when you touch it. One blog suggested first doing a couple of cold water and salt water soaks to get the blood out; other sources suggest buttermilk soaks to soften the meat. I didn’t do any of that, and everything turned out fine. But the livers of larger animals often have tough veins—literal channels of life—that run through them. These must be removed.

The liver—literally, the one who lives—caused me to consider the deer’s



Venison Liver Mousse

<p>2 Tbsp. finely chopped shallot or green onion 1 tsp. olive oil 1 garlic clove, minced ½ cup Cognac 6 oz. deer liver, trimmed</p>	<p>5 large egg yolks 1 cup whole milk ¼ cup all-purpose flour 1¼ tsp. kosher salt ¼ tsp. nutmeg (freshly grated is preferable)</p>	<p>½ tsp. black pepper ¼ tsp. ground allspice 6 Tbsp. clarified butter or ghee (if only regular butter is available, see steps 5–6) 2–3 bay leaves</p>
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1. Preheat oven to 350°F and position rack in the middle.
2. Cook shallot in oil in a 10-inch heavy skillet over medium heat, stirring occasionally until softened, about 4 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring, 1 minute. Remove from heat and add cognac, then boil until reduced to about 2 tablespoons. (Be careful—the Cognac might ignite. If it does, shake the skillet.)
3. Transfer to a blender and purée with liver and yolks. Add milk, flour, salt, pepper, nutmeg, and allspice. Blend until smooth. Pour into an oven-proof crock, casserole, or terrine (3–6-cup capacity, depending on how thick you’d like the mousse). Skim off resulting foam.
4. Put crock in a larger baking pan and bake in a water bath until mousse is set and a small sharp knife inserted in the center comes out clean, about 70 minutes (check at 55 minutes; if using chicken liver, the cook time may be shorter).
5. Melt clarified butter in a small saucepan over low heat, then remove from heat and let stand 3 minutes.
6. Arrange bay leaves on top. Spoon enough butter over mousse to cover its surface. (Or make clarified butter by melting butter, skimming the froth from the top, and leaving the milky solids in the bottom of the pan, using only the clearish liquid.)
7. Chill mousse completely, uncovered, about 4 hours. Bring to room temperature 1 hour before serving. Remove bay leaves. Enjoy with crackers, baguette, or crostini and cornichons.

life. How healthy it must have been from grazing in forest and pastures untouched by pesticides, antibiotics, or factory farming. How a peaceful life is never that forever. How silence, steadiness, and listening might be the difference between one breath and the next. I wondered how Will would remember the day.

Near the end of the madeleine episode in *Swann’s Way*, Proust writes:

... when from a long-distance past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly,

in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

If a single bite has the potential for such catharsis, I think the food we make and share with others is all the more sacred. I’m banking on being transported back from some distant future, maybe when sorrow or disappointment is at the door, and I want to remember richer, jovial times. But Proust would probably say memory doesn’t work that way. You don’t get to choose your sacrament. It is unknowable until the moment it is revealed. Mine will as likely be deep-fried Oreos from the Oklahoma State Fair as it will be a piece of baguette topped with country pâté. Whatever the case, I welcome the occasion while I’m alive to experience it. ■