

Why State Wildlife Agencies Teach Venison-Craving Foodies to Hunt

By Amy Hatfield and Taylor Walston

Months ago, in a steakhouse near Dallas, a group of industry leaders and wildlife-agency marketing heads were gathered for a business dinner when one guy mentioned a Prius-driving Obama supporter with short-cropped hair and ink on her bicep. This young woman evidently wanted to learn to hunt and had shown up at a Deer Hunting 101 course offered by a midwestern state wildlife agency.

“Now wait a minute, wait a minute,” someone at the table joked. “How’d you know this woman was an Obama supporter? Don’t generalize because of the Prius!”

“The Prius had an Obama bumper sticker, my friend,” the guy replied. “So there was a Prius, an Obama bumper sticker and she’s sipping a latte, right? You with me?”

Everyone nodded.

“She’s late and she gets out of the car and says, ‘Is this the class where we learn to catch a deer?’”

Great laughter erupted from everyone at the table. The irony, the story’s fish-out-of-water appeal, the fascinating, cultural implications of a woman wanting to “catch” a deer: it was all too unlikely. She wanted to be a hunter



Foodies are turning away from longstanding favorites like beef steak and opting for local, sustainable meats like venison.

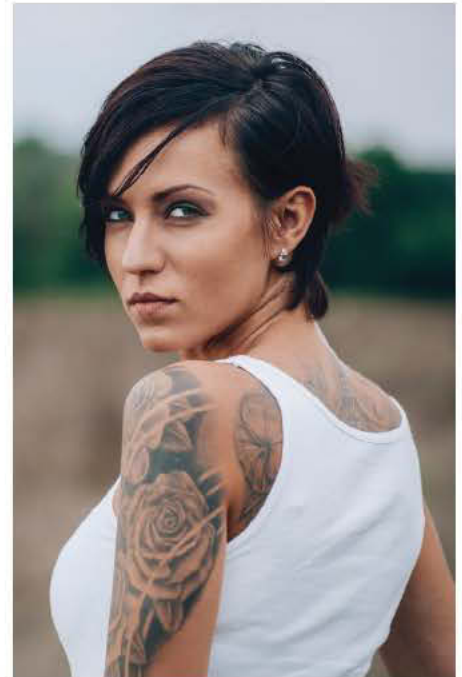
but not for the sake of hunting or the adventure. She just wanted to harvest her own meat.

There is an issue that must be overcome. It is a gaping chasm between this woman’s lifestyle and the lifestyles of many existing hunters, those with stronger ties to rural America and rural-American ways of life. Granted, differences add flavor and contribute a value that’s described best in the Biblical proverb “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” Yet the hurdle is rooted somewhere else; these two groups don’t even share the same vocabulary, much less politics, ideals, styles or convictions. It’s like the city of Babylon with its own modern reboot where Babylon’s wall is recast as the line separating dirt from asphalt, parking lots from food plots and shelter from shade trees. In other words, hunting can’t “catch and spread” if there is a knee-jerk dismissal of someone so foreign to hunting that they declare themselves motivated to “catch a deer.”

With a chasm like this, the hunting community has two choices: we can thank God for the separation and leave these strangers on the other side or we can build a bridge. The folks in Dallas, the ones who found the whole thing amusing, chose to build a bridge.

Why? Because this woman — and other men and women like her — represent demand. And if the hunting community can meet that demand — although it looks different and unlikely to longtime hunters — then hunting is nimble enough to sustain growth and drive revenues for companies dependent on hunters and equipment sales.

What’s equally important and attractive about bridging the chasm is



The Prius-driving Obama supporter with short-cropped hair and ink on her bicep may seem like an unlikely hunter. However, self-sufficiency, environmental stability and obtaining additive-free meat motivate her and others like her to harvest their own meat.

the opportunity to make hunting rights a worthwhile and valid cause for voters, workers and civic leaders in urban, liberal precincts. Therefore, exposure to hunting and quality hunters is critical to the survival of hunting. Anyone in rural Illinois can tell you their state is paced by ideals and legislative agendas set by Chicago’s standards thanks to the city’s huge majority. Georgians tell similar stories about Atlanta’s influence on their state.

For this article, the takeaway is simple: the demand for hunting equipment won’t happen without hunting. Although we’re a long way from such a scenario today, corralling Prius-driving

Obama supporters on the far side of the chasm won't help matters. They're an unmet demand.

Brian Clark, assistant director of the marketing division at Kentucky's Department of Fish and Wildlife, is working to meet (or meat) the demand. "(Our) department has been offering an introductory deer hunting program, Field To Fork, for adults in metro areas the past five years," he said.

The agency's customers aren't just hunters. The target audience is people interested in harvesting their own meat, particularly those interested in local, sustainable foods.

So far, Field To Fork courses have been held during autumn's deer season in one or two cities such as Louisville or Lexington, each with populations of about one million. The state's wildlife agency hopes to replicate and expand the program into other areas by involving more of its partner organizations.

"We try to address the most important elements of deer hunting to help participants obtain essential knowhow and build confidence to ultimately go hunting on their own," Clark said.

Kentucky's program offers classroom instruction on deer hunting regulations, scouting and how to find places to hunt. There are also live demonstrations of field dressing as well as cooking wild game and hands-on activities related to hunter safety, preserving venison and butchering.



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Once, during an early Field To Fork class, the instructor kept the butchering component simple by showing the group how to quarter a deer. The class objected. They wanted more; they wanted everything. Even the heart.

New, unlikely hunters like the Prius-driving Obama-supporter don't like waste. They're often influenced by a minimalist mentality made popular by guys like Steven Rinella, the writer and hunter who eats deer-heart tacos in the field and glorifies grilled beaver tail in tasting notes from his book, "Meat Eater":

"I sliced away a shaving, as thin as a slice of prosciutto. The fat melted in my mouth like butter, leaving a gristly bit of leftover that felt like a combination

of beef jerky and Styrofoam. It was wonderful."

A growing number of writers and television personalities like Rinella dare to reference something like "beaver tail" and "prosciutto" in the same passage. Understand, also, a passage like that marks a significant crossroad where "hunter" meets "foodie," blending the two like flour and eggs in cake batter.

And what of the end product once it's baked? You have a person who is affluent and impractical enough to spend \$6 on a latte while also harboring a minimalist's willingness to eat deer heart: in other words, our tattooed Obama-supporter. Such folks find value in both a Prius and a shotgun.

Those attending Field To Fork classes reinforce the growing demand for hunting knowledge from people sharing similar ideals and lifestyles. Their motivations are self-sufficiency, using local foods, obtaining additive-free meat, environmental sustainability, animal welfare and new life and outdoor experiences. Those experiences include being closer to or better appreciating nature, taking on physical or mental challenges and having more fun outdoors.

"Most importantly, participants have learned, 'I can do this,'" Clark said. "Deer hunting was attainable and practical for them and virtually anyone. Not all of our participants have been hunting but virtually all said they want to in the future."

While Clark doesn't presume all Field To Fork participants see themselves as hunters after taking the course, many of them do. Further, they're more likely to hunt in the future.

Kentucky also found in a recent survey that most respondents (over half of the participants) said they had bought new crossbows, bows and/or firearms and participated in hunting after their course.

"An important take-home is that the organic (pardon the puns) reach beyond the immediate program participants is potentially great," Clark said. "These participants are adults who



Kentucky's Department of Fish and Wildlife offers Field to Fork, an introductory deer hunting program, to introduce hunting to people interested in harvesting their own meat, particularly those interested in local, sustainable foods.

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Wisconsin's department of natural resources implemented a program called *Learn to Hunt for Food*, which resembles Kentucky's *Field To Fork* program. Keith Warnke, the program's coordinator, said many participants ask about archery. The program is looking for ways to start up a crossbow-loaner program for novice adults.

have their own transportation, means for purchasing hunting equipment and networks of influence with friends and family."

Meanwhile, Kentucky isn't the only state launching into this new territory. Wisconsin's department of natural resources implemented a program called "Learn to Hunt for Food," which resembles Kentucky's *Field To Fork* program. Keith Warnke, the program's coordinator, said many participants (over 150 so far) ask about archery.

"They're uber interested in the silent part of hunting," Warnke said, "so we're looking for ways to start up a crossbow-loaner program this year for novice adults."

Although Clark and Warnke don't believe foodies, "locavores" or other food-related communities are "silver bullets" that address every agency and industry concern about hunting participation, they are convinced it's important to reach out to food-motivated hunting prospects for recruitment and retention programs.

"Because the exposure we provide is 100 percent positive, the support and good will generated are passed along inside the networks and communities from which these participants come," Warnke said. "It embodies the old adage that word of mouth is still the most popular form of communication and that authenticity matters most!"

Warnke thinks a critical part of the

program is that the agency is starting to embrace the Outdoor Recreation Adoption Model. "That may seem a little pointy-headed and professorial but all it means is that becoming a hunter/angler/archer is a process, not an event," Warnke said. "We must recognize and understand the process. I get the best picture from thinking about my own beginning as a hunter. It took years: years. Not a one-off single event. The same is true of my kids. And it's also true of the 40 new adult friends I make every fall. If we provide the right process, there's plenty of interest to serve."

Don't be surprised if someday soon, you see a Prius parked at the edge of a wildlife management area in the Midwest. You'll probably find the hybrid there when the snow is falling and the deer are moving. Inside, what's

left of a latte is growing cold. And on the back bumper, you'll smile at an Obama sticker that reads, "Yes we can."

To Learn More

Along with other state-agency representatives and partners including the ATA, Clark and Warnke are helping to spearhead a grant-funded project to gather existing tools and develop new resources. These assets help agencies and sportsmen's groups offer hunting and fishing instruction for adults from nontraditional backgrounds, especially those motivated to hunt for their own protein sources.

This grant-funded introductory hunting project will also produce online modules and tool kits for training instructors and mentors in programs like *Field To Fork* and *Learn to Hunt for Food*. The team is contracting with D.J. Case and Associates, including Bob Byrne Consulting, to develop a website for these online resources. Instructional resources are expected to be available to states and partners in October 2016. Clark and Warnke welcome anyone with tools or experience to share them with the program to create the best possible products. Copies of promotional materials, instructional aids or links to video segments should be sent to Matt@DJCase.com as soon as possible.

More information about this project is available on the recruitment, retention and re-activation - the so-called "R3" - community website, <http://r3nationalplan.ning.com/>.



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