

Tasting the Wild: Hunting and Game Consumption in the Central Pyrenean Area from the Early Eighteenth Century to the Beginning of the Second World War

Frédéric Duhart

Abstract

The spa society has played an important role in the central Pyrenean economy since the early eighteenth century. Hunting and game consumption developed in this region as a complex phenomenon, influenced by both the demand for local or refined foods and medical advice. As a consequence of the spa society's desire for local products, some Pyrenean animals were designated as game and the consumption of some species (e.g., bear) evolved in ways different from local customs. The spa society also developed new forms of hunting, which affected the physical and social environments. Gradually, hunting and game consumption became part of Pyrenean identity and representation. The species highlighted in this paper are: *Rupicapra rupicapra* (chamois), *Ursus arctos* (bear), *Tetrao urogallus* (capercaillie), *Lagopus mutus* (ptarmigan), *Bonasa bonasia* (hazel grouse), *Turdus torquatus* (ring ouzel) and *Columba palumbus* (wood pigeon).

Introduction

In the early modern era, the discovery of the recreational potential of the Pyrenean landscape and the birth of fashionable spas led to the existence of two very different communities in the central Pyrenees: a seasonal population, comprised by tourists and foreigners who come to take the waters, appears beside the old mountain societies. This new situation has very important effects on the local economy, in the full etymological meaning of this word: new productive and commercial activities spring up while some relations with nonhuman elements of the local ecosystem are radically modified. The evolution of hunting and game consumption is a perfect example of these changes: practices and desires of Pyrenean visitors characterize some species as games; they also create markets for wild meats and give them important functions in gastronomic and symbolic discourses.

The Invention of A New Pyrenean Hunting

In the early modern era, Pyrenean countrymen have a fierce attachment to their hunting rights, which enable protecting against the enemies of flocks – wolves and bears. Hunting collectives officially organised to kill carnivores may change into real - and illegal - hunting parties in the piedmont (Desplat 1997:135); hunting with inefficient firearms constitutes above all a defensive act (Bouchet 1990:45-46) for the communities of the highest lands where classical game such as hare and partridge are scarce (de Froidour [1667] 1892:96). From a local point of view, few of the mountain fauna are game, because they are not hunted. The local population, with the exception of a few notables from towns of the piedmont, no longer hunt chamois (*Rupicapra rupicapra*): the hunt evoked by Gaston Phoebus belongs to a distant past ([1387] 1986:52). In fact, in the early modern era only one important form of hunting for meat is still practiced. This is the capture of migrant birds in the passes, especially pigeons (*Columba palumbus* and *C. oenas*).

The curiosity of Pyrenean visitors creates new relations with the mountain fauna: the majority of species are regarded as potential game worthy of shooting. When Roger de Bouillé and his friends ascend a mountain with their guns, many wild animals risk being killed and eaten. In one day, they shot various tits (*Parus major*, *P. palustris*, *P. caeruleus*, *P. cristatus*; *Aegithalos caudatus*), bullfinches (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*), robins (*Erithacus rubecula*), black redstarts (*Phoenicurus ochruros*) and, while the first catch is roasting, dippers (*Cinclus cinclus*) and a squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*). On another day, during a chamois hunting, they also kill black redstarts and Alpine accentors (*Prunella collaris*) (Saint-Lèbe 1999:28-29). This form of total hunting is one of the ways of discovering the mountain, of inventing it. Thanks to his gun, the hunter apprehends an inventory of the local fauna. In Bagnères the birds that are sold daily to collectors and amateur ornithologists (Anonymous 1833) show that this hunt can become a natural science work in the tradition of the explorers of exotic territories. When the fork immediately succeeds the weapon in the mediation between the hunter and his prey, the encounter with the mountain does not take the form of scientific classification. It is much more intimate: the eater appropriates a part of Pyrenees life, which is not necessarily a gourmand act, as *Ornithologie Pyrénéenne* reveals. In this work, published in 1873, Philippe completes his descriptions of raptors with several alimentary references, not all of which are likely the fruit of real experience – for example, it is not certain that, except in this book, Pyrenean dwellers cook and eat vultures (*Gyps fulvus* and *Aegypius monachus*), because these birds are just shot by some tourists "to have fun" (Oberthur 1941:78-79). However, describing the taste of peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*) or kestrels (*F. tinnunculus*), even if it is based more in ornithological imagination than in authentic culinary practice, offers the richest description of these birds, the only

total knowledge of them, and through them, of the mountain (Philippe 1873:2-9).

When the hunt turns into one of the numerous distractions of the spa visitors, it generates new local activities, such as the job of the specialised guides who lead wealthy amateurs from Luz to steep places where they can find chamois and other game (Joanne 1873:141). Efforts are made to vary the cynegetic pleasures; for instance, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) were acclimated in mountain forests close to Bagnères-de-Luchon. Hunting also becomes the motivation of certain sojourns in the Pyrenees: some sportsmen go here specially to track local species. They often have high quality weapons, which have important implications for ecosystem relations: for example, the use of automatic rifles in the early twentieth century eventuated in a great decline in the ibex (*Capra ibex*) population (Oberthur 1941:48).

The practices of the foreign hunters led to the birth of a new Pyrenean hunting, characterized by new game animals, new methods, and new motivations (from simple diversion to the quest for adventure). Nevertheless, the whole spa society participates in a new, predatory, relation with the mountain fauna: its members appreciate wild meats, and the local economy organises itself to provide them.

Tasting the Pyrenees

In spas, very ill individuals follow a strict diet, while others visitors enjoy fine dining based on the best products of the plain and mountain resources, notably dairy products, trout, mushrooms and game. The local population finds in these needs new outlets for economic activities, including special hunts.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the teacher of Jarret notes that numerous poachers pursue ring ouzels (*Turdus torquatus*) to sell their catch to gourmets; the financial interest of this forbidden hunting was confirmed a few decades later when this black and white passerine became one of the seasonal Pyrenean specialities recommended by promoters of gastronomic nomadism (J.-A. P. Cousin 1928:70). Capercaillies (*Tetrao urogallus*), ptarmigans (*Lagopus mutus*) and hazel grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*) shot down more or less lawfully were sold to wealthy gourmets (Richard 1839:118) and to restaurants such as the Hostellerie de la Barbacane du chateau in Foix, which is proud of its "white partridge" (J.-A. P. Cousin 1928:119).

Because chamois meat has been appreciated in the spas since the eighteenth century (Meighan 1742:17), this animal has been the object of intensive hunting in the vicinity of these towns, where it is shot by athletic pursuers or trapped by sly persons (Saint-Amans 1789:119, Leroy 1776:11). The tallies realised by some of these professional hunters are impressive; for instance,

Joseph Naudy from Auzat annually killed between thirty seven and forty chamois during the last third of the eighteenth century (Magné de Marolles [1836] 1982:178). The decline in species numbers in certain parts of the range follows this early cynegetic pressure, which has an effect on the trade of its meat: A. d'Assier noted in 1873 that the price of one chamois had tripled over a few years in Aulus, and that "some well-kept hotels" in areas where chamois had become very scarce substituted other meats under its name in western spas situated (d'Assier 1873:133).

The palates of spa visitors created a great demand for bear meat (*Ursus arctos*) after it became a fashionable food during the nineteenth century. It commanded a high price as hotels and restaurants hastened to offer their clients various sure-success specialities: ham, fillet, and salmis [rich stew] of bear were eagerly anticipated by the tourists (Bouchet 1990:102). By the first decades of the twentieth century, Pyrenean bear had become a gastronomic myth; Curnonsky and M. Rouff wrote that "its fillet is worthy of Mount Olympus" but note that it was extremely difficult to find bear on restaurant menus (Curnonsky and Rouff 1928:60-61).

Eating these wild meats fulfills a desire of the picturesque. It is even a necessary stage of a successful sojourn, in the same way that the walking famous sites is. Thus, newcomers are delighted to carry out this alimentary experiment, which is an occasion to accumulate unique memories: "what a pleasure to a Parisian when he can say on his return that he has eaten a Pyrenean bear steak!" Nevertheless, the satisfaction produced by the consumption of mountain animals is often limited to this feeling of strangeness: the patrons who were greedy for chamois on the first day quickly returned to "ordinary meals," and the first mouthful of bear reveals a tough meat with a repulsive smell (d'Assier 1873:101,133). The powerful taste of mountain gallinaceans brings another picturesque touch to the table. For instance, because of their winter diet of fir trees, "hazel grouses and capercaillies frequently have an unpleasant taste of turpentine" (Leroy 1776:12); cooks tried to reduce this flavour (Dardenne [1805] 1990:224). Paradoxically, this resin taste played an important part in the interest of foreign consumers in these birds. Because it clearly distinguishes gallinaceans from ordinary game and poultry, it synthesizes their Pyrenean nature. The brown and tough meat which was tolerated in mountain species is not necessarily appreciated in the wood pigeon (*Columba palumbus*), because some travellers who discovered it at the end of the season considered it a simple pigeon less savoury than "the fattened dove which is a delicate food" (Anonymous 1833:60).

Important contrasts appear between residents and foreigners in ways of eating bear and pigeon. When a bear is eaten in a resident community, it is shared among the group of in accordance with precise rules. Generally, the hunters consume the blood and liver just after the death of the animal; later all the villagers communally eat the boiled meat (Bouchet 1990:101-102). There is

here a ritual meal with complex interrelations with the "wild world" based on a controlled circulation of the "black blood" (Hell 1994:51-95), as the temporal removal of a cowherd who has eaten too much bear flesh during one of these dinner confirms (Bouchet 1990:101). This form of consumption of bear differs from the fashionable practices in its social implications and in its cooking techniques: if the cooking of bear offers a certain variety in the spas, its meat is roasted or fried in the most appreciated recipes. Curnonsky and A. de Croze note for example that the leg must be prepared like a roast beef (Curnonsky and de Croze 1933:226).

As the majority of pigeons captured in the nets of the *pantières* (installations constructed in certain passes) are sold, this hunt constitutes an important economic interest for the communities where it is practised. Eating pigeons is not a common practice within the circle of the hunters and marks great times of the hunting season. In Saint-Pé, at the end of the nineteenth century, stock doves (*Columba oenas*) were tasted when twelve had been caught; and if three hundred pigeons were captured in one day, every hunter could eat one in the course of a party called the *couloumado* (the banquet). Although this hunt starts when the spa season ends, it is a great attraction for tourists who take advantage of their excursion to eat roasted pigeons as close as possible to the hunting installation. First, such meals are variants of the classical "mountain picnic" (Magné de Marolles [1836] 1982:354), but they can change the topography of a place in the course of time: when the teacher of Saint-Pé writes his monograph, there is a specialised restaurant near the local *pantière*.

Conclusion

Spas are not isolated towns in a mountainous countryside but are centres whose internal dynamics have effects on the broader ecosystem. The new Pyrenean hunting that grows out of the spa phenomenon is multi-faceted. Some people explore the mountain with a stick in one hand and a gun in the other: for them, nearly all the animals are identified as game that can be shot and eaten. Although they are not representative of all foreign hunters, because of their excesses, their practices characterize the new Pyrenean hunt: compared to how residents hunt, the new hunt is constituted by new game animals, new motivations and new methods. The discovery of the Pyrenean landscape is accompanied by an attraction for picturesque characters, situations or things. So, some mountain products, which were not important for the traditional local diet, become fashionable because when he tastes them, the visitor literally eats pieces of Pyrenees. This passion for wild meat generates a flourishing market and a concentrated predatory activity, the long-term consequences of which are substantial. Roasted bear fillets served at restaurants remind us of the gap between certain spa uses and local customs. However, game is not the only wild food used by the cooks of the spas; fishes, mushrooms and berries also

pay tribute to the stomachs of the tourists. There are various ways to consume the Pyrenees!

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