



Oregon's new breed of rabbit farmer

By Special to The Oregonian

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Northwest independents try to keep up with demand

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I used to wrinkle my nose at the thought of eating rabbit. How could I eat the grade school classroom pet?

Some vile rabbit patties I sampled as an exchange student in France only confirmed my aversion, and the meat stayed off my radar for several years -- until a menu at Portland's Simpatuca Dining Hall compelled me to try it again.

Recipes included with story: Rabbit With Bell Peppers (Coniglio ai Peperoni), Braised Rabbit Pappardelle With Morels Artichokes Olives and Pancetta, Barbecued Rabbit

There, a toothsome rabbit sugo (or ragu), flecked with fennel pollen and spooned over fresh-cut pappardelle, proved so revelatory I vowed to try cooking rabbit at home.

Fortunately, thanks to Oregon's handful of far-flung rabbit breeders, I wouldn't have to raise, slaughter and skin it myself, although these days intrepid D.I.Y. folks -- like their Depression and World War II-era forebears -- are doing just that.

Oregon once boasted a much larger industry, with trucks transporting some 35,000 rabbits a month to California for processing. But in the early 1990s, budget cuts shuttered the nation's leading rabbit research center at OSU, and now less than 2,000 a month are shipped, says Don Higgins, who has raised rabbits on his Gold Hill farm since 1979.

But that doesn't mean there isn't a market for the meat. At Bay Area restaurants, "they're crying for rabbits," says Higgins. "The demand has always been there. It's just that the supply has gradually gone down."

Portland chefs don't have that problem, with wild game supplier Nicky USA in town. Two decades ago, Nicky owner Geoff Latham started peddling rabbit out of the trunk of his Ford Escort. Now he's the region's top source, buying wholesale from area farms and processing the meat at his certified facility. He keeps adding new customers, most recently Bluehour and Lucy's Table (think rabbit paella). Last year, rabbit sales in Oregon were higher than they'd been in a decade.

Julia Sunkler, who runs a one-woman homestead in Monroe south of Corvallis, keeps hundreds of common New Zealand and California whites, plus some of a darker Satin breed. Growing up in Cottage Grove, she began raising rabbits as a teen to occupy herself after her father died. Then as an animal science student in the mid-'80s, she worked at the Oregon State rabbitry in Corvallis.



Thomas Boyd/The Oregonian

A handful of Oregon farmers, including Julia Sunkler of Monroe, are working hard to bring back the state's once-thriving rabbit industry.

Today she maintains a strict schedule on My Pharm, mating her herd on Mondays and Tuesdays and tending to new litters on Thursdays and Fridays. In between she butchers the rabbits at a friend's chicken farm about once a month, then sells them directly to restaurants and at Corvallis' two weekly markets, where she's a regular, even into winter, dressed in worn overalls, braids and a newsboy cap. In addition to rabbit, poultry, pork and vegetables, Sunkler hawks rabbit pelts and turkey feathers, which are used for traditional Native American clothing.

I first bought a rabbit from Sunkler at the market at the Benton County Fairgrounds in February 2009, and braised it with mustard, carrots and leeks for a stick-to-your-ribs meal.

But I, like many diners, had wrongly pigeonholed rabbit as a winter meat. In fact, fresh rabbit is most plentiful come summer.

Each spring when the does and bucks start breeding, litters of six to 12 babies -- called kits -- are born after just one month of gestation. The tender young fryers are then processed at eight to 12 weeks of age. Older rabbits yield cheaper, tougher meat (think stewing hens).

Unfortunately, rabbit demand drops off after May, right at peak season, because most recipes call for stewing the lean meat in heavy, cold-weather sauces. "We have a supply and demand curve that is exactly opposite," Nicky's Latham says.

But there's no reason why rabbit can't be a great choice for summer menus. Latham enjoys it stuffed into sausages or doused with teriyaki sauce and grilled.

Grilling is also Sunkler's favorite preparation for rabbit (see accompanying recipe). Last year, just after she had just recovered from a collision that totaled her truck and nearly put both her and the farm under, she served grilled rabbit and saddle loins at her 45th birthday party.

Peering into the hutches at My Pharm, you feel less guilty about eating the quivering rabbits when you consider how quickly they reproduce. Sunkler is stoic about the daily casualties, which can include starved or crushed babies, as well as does killed by extreme heat or cold shocks. One day, Sunkler hopes to afford a climate-controlled barn to protect against such loss.

The labor-intensive work makes rabbit meat expensive. Although Sunkler sells direct for \$5.85 a pound, it often retails for nearly twice as much. Sunkler wholesales to Nicky what she can't sell herself.

"Wholesaling, I barely cover feed expenses, and then if some catastrophe happens, I lose money," Sunkler says.

So is rabbit a sustainable food? Well, free-range ones are rare, since they're so vulnerable to predators like raccoons, coyotes and owls. However, Braeside Farms in Estacada soon plans to start pasturing rabbits in a mobile enclosure similar to a chicken "tractor," which will give the animals access to grass but protect them and prevent them from digging holes to escape.

The alfalfa that makes up the rabbits' antibiotic-free feed thrives in the Willamette Valley (unlike corn), and Sunkler buys the pellets from a local Harrisburg mill. Gardens also love odorless rabbit droppings, a ready-to-use fertilizer that doesn't burn plants the way chicken manure does. The only thing that is thrown away are the once-precious pelts, which are no longer marketable thanks largely to the anti-fur movement.

As for the meat, rabbit is delicate and easy to digest. In fact, Sunkler says a customer with cancer swears that after chemotherapy, rabbit is all she can stomach. It's also lower in fat and calories than chicken. However, without the skin and fat to protect the meat, rabbit requires moist cooking -- such as stewing or braising -- to prevent it from drying out.

At Simpatica and spinoff Laurelhurst Market, it's nose-to-cottontail cooking. Chef Scott Ketterman and company braise rabbit in stock made from the carcass and serve it in the aforementioned rabbit sugo. Ketterman also grinds the hindquarter meat into sausage that he then rolls with rabbit loins for a boneless roast similar to the Italian specialty porchetta.

Even rabbit liver has its uses. At Beast, Naomi Pomeroy recently roasted quail stuffed with rabbit liver, local ramps and brioche chunks. Home cooks can use the liver, which tastes almost identical to a chicken's, to make pâté. Many suppliers can special order the livers for you.

If you want to cook rabbit yourself, it's readily available whole at several local stores (see accompanying list), and many will cut it into pieces on request. You can also cut it yourself (see www.saveur.com/gallery/Easy-Pieces-Cutting-a-Whole-Rabbit for a demonstration), but be warned that tiny yet hard rabbit bones can splinter, requiring a bit more attention than those of a chicken.

Portland's adventurous palates may be just warming up to rabbit. But as with offal, the meat tends to sell better at restaurants as a starter dish than a main course. Renegade chefs just sometimes forget all diners don't share their enthusiasm.

"Rabbits are kind of hard," says Benjamin Dyer, of Simpatica and Laurelhurst Market. "We love it, but the general populace can still be a little skittish."

Laura McCandlish, a Corvallis writer, blogs at baltimoreoregon.com. She co-hosts a monthly radio show on KBOO 90.7 FM (kboo.fm/foodshow) the third Wednesday of the month at 11 a.m.

Here are some sources for rabbit:

My Pharm (Julia Sunkler): whole rabbit \$5.85/pound; 541-424-2233

Rain Shadow el Rancho: whole rabbit \$5.25/pound; 541-259-5006; www.rainshadowelrancho.com

Chop Butchery and Charcuterie: Whole for \$9.95/pound/\$14.95/pound for hindquarters only; chopbutchery.com; 503-221-3012

Laurelhurst Market: whole for \$10/pound. They'll cut rabbit for you; laurelhurstmarket.com; 503-206-3099

Nicky USA: whole fryers sold individually for about \$7/pound; cut fryers sold by the case only by special order; hindquarters, livers and special cuts of saddle and loin also available; 503-234-4263; nickyusa.com

Pastaworks on Hawthorne: whole rabbit for \$7/pound; 503-232-1010; pastaworks.com

Sheridan Fruit Co.: whole rabbit for \$6.99/pound; 503-236-2113; sheridanfruit.com

Uwajimaya: whole rabbit, frozen, \$7.99/pound; 503-643-4512; uwajimaya.com

Zupan's Burnside: (other locations often have to order) whole rabbit for \$11.99/pound; hindquarters for \$19.99/pound; 503-497-1088; zupans.com

Market of Choice and **New Seasons** can order but don't regularly carry rabbit.

If you raise your own rabbits, **Paul Batchelder** in Battle Ground, Wash., will custom butcher them on-site for \$5 apiece plus gas. He also sells his own rabbit meat for \$2.50 a pound; 360-487-9391; tillybea33@aol.com.

Scio Poultry Processing Inc. also custom butchers rabbits at its facility outside Albany; \$4.25 per rabbit; contact Rain Shadow el Rancho (see above).

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