

A Taste of Autumn

by

Leona Francombe

Years ago, we bought our daughter a little white rabbit with cute black ears for her birthday.

OK, I know what you're thinking: this is an ominous way to begin an essay about meat. Certainly, if you wandered into just about any decent butcher shop in Belgium, your fears would be justified. Thighs of rabbit and hare, naked as plucked chickens, lie in succulent rows next to smoked hams and peppery patés. Game season is upon us - those high holy days of good eating – and chunks of wild boar are starting to appear, dense and pungent, along with pheasants carrying warning labels to look out for stray bits of buckshot.

The grocer across the street used to have no end of fun with our rabbit.

'Need some onions for the stew?' he would quip. Indeed, he sold just about everything you might need for rabbit stew, a popular dish in these parts: thyme, yellow onions, bay, garlic; and a robust red wine for the cook.

As the years passed, the grocer's comments aged gracefully with the rabbit. 'He's probably getting a little tough for stew,' he conceded, on the creature's ninth birthday. Then, wistfully: 'But what about rabbit paté?'

It's funny how a dish loses its appeal when you become emotionally attached to the main ingredient. Gastronomy is one thing; sentiment, quite another. No one would consider eating their dog or cat, after all (though I can't speak for the Chinese). One might as well throw a member of the family in with the carrots and onions. Dogs in this country take up seats on trams, for Pete's sake; they'll probably be granted voting rights in a year or two.

So, like most devoted pet owners, we saw hidden facets in our rabbit invisible to outsiders: the aura of quiet he had about him, like a philosopher; the way he licked our

palms in greeting; how he stretched flat out under the begonias on hot summer days to feel the coolness of the earth.

There I go...yes, it's true, I loved him; and no, I could never have eaten him.

But pet rabbits notwithstanding, game season is nigh, and only a vegetarian can snub this culinary epiphany in Belgium without remorse. Sultry August, with its fitful meals, is over, and one cool morning, limping in from the desert like the prodigal son, appetite returns.

In Brussels, an autumn lunch typically starts with a long, damp walk through the forest. Rainy nights have turned last year's leaves into rotted, glistening layers that slither underfoot, releasing suddenly the trapped breath of the soil, and under its lip, the darker spice of mushrooms. Breathe deeply, and the soul stirs awake. Hunger takes on a pleasant edge you haven't felt for weeks.

It's time to head back to the Brasseries Georges for a meal.

A heavy velvet curtain hangs at the door of the restaurant, keeping out the chill. Pull it aside, and a jovial hum embraces you. Mirrors line the walls, catching the gleam from brass fittings and throwing it back over a sea of expensive tweed and corduroy, and tawny, lacquered hair. The gleam mirrors your own skin, fresh from the woods, and your clean, ready palette.

A waiter in floor-length apron solemnly hands over the holy text: roasted young boar with garlic potatoes; doe in a claret sauce; saddle of hare with truffles.

We order, and sip a berry-black merlot. All around, heads bend in the measured ritual of the table. Speech is drawn into tight remarks by the weaving of knife and fork. As in any temple, a higher purpose hangs weightily over the proceedings; and as the higher purpose happens to be food, gastronomy easily overpowers sentiment. In the zeal of shared devotion, no one is thinking of furry white rabbits or bright-eyed does.

Well, almost no one.

I ordered fish.

And just to reassure you, our rabbit lived a long and happy life. We buried him just a few months ago, thighs intact, in the cool earth under the begonias.