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From field to feast

Entrepreneur Jed Conklin takes his hunting and fishing pursuits to the next level as a big game foodie

By ERIC BARKER of the Tribune
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Jed Conklin of Hailey, Idaho, and formerly of Spokane, is a freelance photographer, real estate entrepreneur and restaurant owner.

Photo courtesy of Jed Conklin

Jed Conklin, a freelance photographer, real estate entrepreneur and restaurant owner recently of Spokane, doesn't recall a time when he wasn't a hunter or angler.

"My earliest memories are in the woods with my dad," Conklin said. "My mom went into labor with me while fishing."

So of course he knows how to cook wild game. But as he grew older and explored the Western United States and the world, Conklin befriended chefs who introduced him to another level of culinary arts.

"I really got into the finer nuances of cooking, certainly way more recently," he said. "I started doing more advanced recipes beyond grilling burgers and steaks and making Crock-Pot (dishes)."

The-biggest-commitment-to-Idahoans-in-the-history-of-Idaho big.



Clos



Kentucky roots

His family had a farm in Kentucky where he grew up hunting everything from whitetail deer to squirrels and ducks. In college Conklin was known as a sort of provider who would share his deer, ducks and other game with fellow journalism students and his instructors at Western Kentucky University.

After graduating with degrees in print and photojournalism, he landed photography internships that brought him west, first at the Pinedale Roundup, in Pinedale, Wyo., and then at the Jackson Hole News & Guide, also in the Cowboy State. He parlayed those gigs into a position as a staff photographer at the Spokesman-Review in Spokane.

With a full-time job and income that allowed him to purchase out-of-state tags, Conklin started exploring the hunting opportunities of the West. His first elk hunt, with his dad and a couple of college buddies, could not have gone better.

On the morning of opening day, he hiked up to a saddle. Soon, a bull bugled below him.

“I ripped off a terrible bugle back and sat there.”

“About 10 minutes later a group of cows filed past, followed by a big five-point bull, and 45 minutes into my elk hunting career I had my first bull on the ground,” he said. “I was like ‘S***, this is easy.’ Little did I know.”

Upping his game

A chef friend in Missoula exposed Conklin to the world of fine cooking.

“I would take him stuff, and he would make s*** you wouldn’t believe,” he said.

He later became a freelance photographer and traveled the globe but returned to Spokane where a friend helped him buy some commercial property. He and chef Tony Brown opened the restaurant Hunt in one of his properties and then Redband — a small event center named for native trout of the Columbia Basin, including the Spokane River. Through that experience, which included working closely with Brown and other foodies, plus cooking with his wife, Courtney, his culinary skills went through a renaissance.

“All of a sudden the sky becomes the limit for new dishes and ways to look at wild game,” he said. “It was sort of a mind explosion.”

He eventually started the Instagram account Field-to-Feast and an associated Youtube channel as a way to share what he has learned.

Here, he shares a pair of his favorite dishes:

> ELK ROAST

“Anybody can do it,” Conklin said. “This is not complicated.”

It does take some time, however. Set aside a long afternoon for this dish.

Ingredients:

3- to 5-pound roast

Rustic cut roasting vegetables of choice

Stock

1 stick of butter

Fresh herbs — thyme, rosemary, oregano.

Salt, pepper

Any cut of about 3 to 5 pounds, such as top or button rounds, will do, but roasts with more sinew and tendons, especially those from the neck or shanks, are a good choice for this slow cook. Preheat oven to 400.

Pat dry the fully thawed roast and cover it with a rub of salt and black pepper. Conklin likes to add a bit of ground coffee at a ratio of about three parts salt and pepper to one part coffee. Those who like a bit of heat can add a spicier pepper as well.

Combine a half stick of butter and ¼ cup of high-heat oil, like avocado oil, in a cast-iron skillet on medium high to high heat. Sear the roast on all sides to the point that it develops a thick, dark brown crust that pings when hit with a fork.

“Make sure it’s hard seared all the way around on every single piece and part — no raw meat visible. That is going to take 15 to 20 minutes.”

Place the seared roast in a braising dish or a Dutch oven. Conklin said a deep dish cast-iron skillet that can be covered with foil will work, but something with a heavy lid is preferred. Add about an inch of homemade elk stock, store-bought beef stock or any stock on hand and put it in the oven, uncovered at this point, for 30 minutes.

Check periodically to ensure the stock doesn’t completely evaporate. After a half an hour to 40 minutes, the roast should start to constrict and shrink as the raw meat beneath the seared crust starts to cook.

When it does, add liquid if needed, baste thoroughly and reduce temperature to 275. Cover and roast for at least two hours and as long as 3 to 3½ hours while basting about every 30 minutes throughout the entire cook and adding liquid as needed.

While it’s cooking, chop your favorite vegetables for roasting. Conklin uses carrots, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, bell and banana peppers, a sweet potato for color and celery.

Uncover, add the vegetables and push them down around the roast. Add fresh herbs like thyme, rosemary and oregano. Add the remaining half a stick of butter on top of the roast and salt and pepper to taste. Cook covered until the vegetables are tender, about 1½ hours. Continue to baste periodically.

Once vegetables are cooked and soft, uncover and turn oven temperature up to 350. Roast until vegetables are nicely browned. Finish on a high broil if you like more of a crust on the vegetables.

The liquid should be reduced to a gravylike or heavy au jus sauce thickness and texture. If it's too thin, pour liquid into a sauce pan and reduce over heat. If it's too thick, add stock and stir.

Plate, pour sauce over roast and vegetables and serve with a nice piece of rustic bread on the side. Conklin recommends pairing with a full-bodied red wine or a juicy IPA.

It's a great dish for people who may be new to wild game.

"It's fork tender and a very delicious home comfort food dish that is easy," he said. "Most people who make Crock-Pot roasts will find this to be well worth the extra effort."

> **Smoked Turkey Breast**

Ingredients:

1 wild turkey breast

Brine — 1 cup of salt and 1 cup of sugar for every gallon of water. A 1-gallon brine works nicely in a 2-gallon zip-close plastic bag.

Fresh limes

Brine breast for at least 24 hours and no more than 48 hours.

Remove from brine, rinse lightly, pat dry and set uncovered on a plate or sheet pan in the fridge until the surface gets tacky.

Marinate tacky breast in about 1 cup of fresh lime juice, pepper and pinch of salt for about an hour. (Breast will be salty from the brine, so easy does it on the salt.)

Remove from marinade and let it dry in the fridge without wiping it off.

Place in a smoker with a fruity wood like apple or cherry at a temperature of about 225.

If using a pellet smoker, pull when the internal temperature hits 150 and crank the smoker up to 450 to 500. Place in oven-safe dish and baste the top with the juice of one lime and a melted half-stick of butter. Return to smoker and cook until the butter and lime mixture on the breast turns a nice golden brown.

If using a traditional smoker, remove when internal temperature hits 155, baste with the lime and melted butter, place in an oven preheated to high broil and remove when the butter and lime mixture on the breast turns a nice golden brown.

With both traditional or pellet smoker, ensure the breast reaches an internal temperature of 165.

Rest 10 to 15 minutes. Serve with fresh spring vegetables like asparagus, snow peas and leafy greens. Pair with a light white wine or a pilsner.

“It’s delicious and a great way to introduce someone to wild turkey,” he said. “It’s just so moist and awesome.”

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