

COVEY RISE®





SPORTING SKILL

Personally bringing game to the table and cooking deliberately, Scott Leysath lives the life of The Sporting Chef.

STORY BY MILES DEMOTT
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My first impression of Chef Scott Leysath came at the small baggage claim area of the Aberdeen Airport. Pheasant hunting is a \$200 million industry in South Dakota, and Aberdeen is a busy port of entry for hunters with their dogs eager to claim their rental trucks, or to meet their guides and get on with it. The latest in sporting cases filled with the appropriate guns and wardrobe is standard travel gear, and Leysath carried those bags, too. But the most treasured of his accouterments was an item found more typically in the arms of departing hunters: He was carrying a cooler.

Known as The Sporting Chef, Leysath has traveled the world with a gun in one hand and a carving knife in the other. His culinary ascension has been remarkable. His early work managing and owning restaurants affirmed his love of cooking and, at the same time, cast a light on a forested trail that only he could see, a path around the daily grind of food service that hung like an albatross around his culinary inclinations. He became more active in conservation groups such as Ducks Unlimited and California Waterfowl, offering his cooking, writing, and editing expertise to their magazines. Those connections led to more cooking demonstrations at outdoor shows and hunting events that, in turn, led to more writing gigs with such magazines as *Waterfowl* and *Wetlands* and *Cooking Wild*.

Next thing you know, Scott Leysath is an authority on cooking wild game. He made his television debut with HGTV's *Paul James' Home Grown Cooking*, and his popularity and authority opened doors on outdoor channels reaching across the country. Leysath answered with his award-winning show, *The Sporting Chef* on Sportsman Channel, which brought his particular talents to my attention. Quietly confident and unassuming, Leysath's anti-chef demeanor was the perfect complement to our common destination, a small lodge called Ringneck Retreat in Hitchcock, the heart of South Dakota pheasant country. But before we get there, let me tell you about the hunting and the conversation. Which brings me back to the cooler.

Leysath's cooler was no ordinary vessel. It was no pristine, sponsor-gifted Yeti with all the trimmings that caught my eye in the Aberdeen baggage claim area. Instead, Leysath hugged a nondescript Igloo cooler of an early vintage, secured by desperate handles and road-wear duct tape, with traces of leafy vegetables springing defiantly from under the lid. My first thought was that somebody ought to get this guy a new cooler. By the end of the trip, I considered the old cooler his greatest badge of honor. While it may be possible to become an expert on cooking wild game without ever picking up a gun, that's not the road Leysath took. From his early years in the woods of Northern Virginia to his more recent residency in the heart of California duck country, The Sporting Chef



WORKING IN THE FIELD

On a recent hunt in South Dakota pheasant country, Chef Scott Leysath wowed the crowd with his midday meal, a fresh pheasant stew that attracted second and third helpings.

has always explored the most direct connection between field and fork. It was no surprise, then, to learn firsthand that Leysath was a good shot. Our hunt was obviously not his first. But the ability to bag pheasant was not his most significant performance afield. On the second day of hunting, I discovered the secrets of the ancient cooler and their connection to Leysath's greatest strength. While unseasonably temperate, the December weather in South Dakota still had a bite—and a bite was what we needed after a chilly morning hunt. Returning to our trucks for a midday respite, we were treated to a fresh pheasant stew that brought many bowls back for seconds—and, dare I say it, thirds. The assemblage of pheasant, sausage, and assorted vegetables was prepared to perfection atop his Camp Chef stove in the middle of nowhere. It was, quite possibly, the finest meal afield I've ever experienced. It was wild game, prepared simply, and served appropriately. Hallmarks of The Sporting Chef.



PHEASANT LEG STEW

SEE THE RECIPE ON PAGE 89

The evenings at the lodge in South Dakota brought ample opportunity to wax philosophically over a good bourbon, and some famous chefs would welcome such an opportunity to explore *ad nauseam* the ounce-by-ounce play-by-play of their most creative or innovative recipes; or the times they served the rich and famous at table. Knowing I was writing a story about him certainly afforded Leysath the opportunity to recite the litany of print outlets that came before me, or the many awards that feather his cap. It was an approach that he declined out of hand. Instead, we talked about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, from a uniquely culinary perspective.

I asked Leysath, for example, what he would do if the world offered a blank slate. He sipped and thought and responded that he wouldn't really change anything. This life he'd evolved into was more than amply satisfying and,

at times, even beyond his wildest imagination. His work required him to spend time afield and time in the kitchen, and these two passions melded together to provide a living wage and a compelling life story.

The culinary arts in today's media world are too often portrayed as the frenzied hyperbole of staged reality challenges and puff pastry wars. But that's not Scott Leysath, whose relaxed calm is at once refreshing and comfortable. The Sporting Chef is no stranger to camera and set, but his many years of corporate and event cooking have seasoned his people skills to absolute perfection.

If you're hunting a recipe for success, Thoreau suggested going in the direction of your dreams and living the life you imagine. Adapting Thoreau, it seems, Scott Leysath packs a few of life's spices into a vintage Igloo cooler, shoulders a trusty shotgun, and goes to the woods to cook deliberately.



DUCK STIR FRY

4 servings

INGREDIENTS

2 cups skinless duck breast fillets, thinly sliced across the “grain”
1 tablespoon cornstarch
¼ cup Ponzu soy sauce (a low-sodium, citrus-infused soy sauce)
½ teaspoon sesame oil
3 tablespoons vegetable or peanut oil
4 green onions, roughly chopped
1 cup celery, thinly sliced
1 cup carrots, thinly sliced
2 cups baby bok choy, halved or shredded cabbage
2 tablespoons pickled ginger, minced
¼ cup Unagi sauce (available in Japanese markets, many grocery stores, or through online suppliers)
1 teaspoon Sriracha, or other hot sauce.

Chef’s note: “Complaints about the taste of wild waterfowl are common. For some reason, too many cooks have decided that the best way to cook a duck is to make it taste like something other than duck. Wrapping strips of marinated duck breast with jalapeño, cream cheese, and bacon seems to be the predominant recipe. Oh sure, it tastes great—but not much like duck. Waterfowl benefits from a good soak in a simple saltwater brine. Combine ½ gallon water with ½ cup kosher salt or any coarse salt, and brown sugar.



Heat a cup or two of water and salt in a saucepan until the salt is dissolved. Cool and add to remaining water. Place ducks or duck parts in the brine for 6 to 12 hours. Rinse, pat dry, and proceed with your favorite recipe. As with any stir-fry, it’s essential that all ingredients are prepped and ready for fast cooking. Do not overcook your duck. If desired, serve over warm cooked rice or noodles.”

1. In a bowl, combine sliced duck breast with cornstarch, Ponzu, and sesame oil and toss to coat evenly and smooth out any lumps from the cornstarch.

2. Heat the oil in a medium-hot skillet or wok. Add the duck and liquid and quickly stir-fry for 1 minute. Add remaining ingredients and stir-fry for 2 to 3 minutes more.

Chef Leysath says: “I grew up in Virginia when standard quail-hunting protocol was searching for promising hedgerows and brier patches. We’d find the landowners and assure them that all gates would be closed, no livestock would be liberated, and, if needed, we would help with any heavy lifting or grunt work as repayment. We didn’t have dogs, just a good sense of where bobwhites like to hang out and we could always find enough rocks to scare them out of a brush pile or berry thicket. I’ve since never been without at least two setters, either English or Gordon.”



PHEASANT STREET TACO

4 servings (3 tacos per serving)

INGREDIENTS

1½ cups shredded cooked pheasant leg and thigh meat (see instructions for the braise on page 89)
¼ teaspoon kosher salt
¼ teaspoon ground coriander
Pinch ground cumin
Pinch cayenne pepper
¼ cup fresh cilantro leaves, chopped
2 tablespoons olive oil
⅓ cup sour cream
2 tablespoons lime juice
Pinch sugar
24 small corn tortillas, quickly browned in a hot skillet
¼ cup Cotija cheese (or any other cheese you prefer)

⅔ cup *pico de gallo* (or a favorite salsa)
2 cups shredded lettuce
2 radishes, julienned

Chef's note: “Here we have yet another example of how smaller is sometimes better. Street tacos were so-named by Americans after they were discovered being served by street vendors across Mexico. Smallish corn tortillas are doubled to keep the filling from falling onto the street while being eaten standing up. It’s street food and it’s delicious. This version is a tad more Americanized from your basic street food, and what you put in your street taco is obviously a matter of personal choice. If pulled leg and thigh pheasant meat is not available, cooked and shredded

breast fillets will do the trick.”

PREPARING THE TACOS

1. In a bowl, combine the cooked pheasant with the next five ingredients from the list at left and mix well. Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat, add the pheasant mixture and cook, stirring often, until hot.
2. Whisk together sour cream, lime juice, and sugar.
3. Arrange warm corn tortillas, two stacked per serving, on a work surface. Top each with pheasant mixture, *pico de gallo*, shredded lettuce, cheese, and radishes. Drizzle the sour cream mixture over each.

PHEASANT LEG STEW

8 to 10 servings

INGREDIENTS

½ cup butter
1 cup carrot, peeled and diced
1 cup celery, diced
1 cup yellow onion, diced
3 garlic cloves, minced
½ cup flour
5 cups pheasant or chicken stock
2 cups mushrooms, thinly sliced
2 cups whole milk (Optional—if omitted, add an additional 2 cups stock)
1 cup cooked wild rice
2 cups cooked pheasant, shredded
Salt and pepper

THE BRAISE

Braising is much the same process that most people use with their slow-cookers. Tough cuts of meat are first browned before slowing simmering them in a shallow pool of flavorful liquid in a covered container. This is a great way to turn pheasant legs and thighs into tender vittles. After several hours in a low-temperature oven, otherwise tough muscles can be easily pulled away from the bones. Best of all, braising can be done well in advance and in mass quantities. Save the legs and carcasses in the freezer until ready to use and braise them all at once.

Brown the pheasant legs in a large lightly-oiled, heavy-duty, oven-safe stock pot. Add diced onion, celery, and carrot. Continue the browning process until the onions are translucent. Remove the pheasant legs. Add about 1 inch of liquid—wine, broth, water, or a combination—and stir to deglaze bits stuck to the pot. Return browned pheasant legs to the pot, cover, and place in a 325-degree oven, making sure that there is always at least ¾- to 1-inch of liquid in the pot. After 3 hours, test for doneness. Meat will fall off the bones when done. Cool and remove the meat.



SPECIAL SAUCES

New pepper sauces such as Midland Ghost and Pappy from Pappy & Company add a flavorful kick to Chef Leysath’s pheasant stew—or other foods

THE STOCK

Return picked leg and thigh bones to the braising pot. Add additional celery, carrots, onions, along with a few garlic cloves, a bay leaf or two, and, if available, a few sprigs of fresh herbs. Cover the contents of the pot with cold water. Bring to a low boil, then reduce the heat to low and simmer, uncovered, for several hours. Pour contents of the pot through a colander to remove large pieces. Discard contents of colander, line the colander with cheesecloth or paper towels, and pour liquid through the colander to clarify the stock.

THE STEW

Any recipe for a stew should be used as an outline, a starting point from which you simmer a palatable blend of protein, vegetables, and stock. Adding

a starchy component like potatoes or rice will add body to an otherwise brothly pot of stew.

1. Melt half the butter in a large stockpot over medium heat. Add next ingredients (from list at left) and cook until onions are translucent.
2. Add butter. When the butter is melted, sprinkle flour over the vegetables and stir often for 3 minutes. Stir in ½ cup pheasant or chicken stock and continue stirring until smooth. Add remaining stock, a little at a time, while stirring.
3. Add mushrooms and milk (if you want it a little creamy), bring to a boil, and simmer for 10 minutes. Stir in rice and shredded pheasant. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

ROASTED QUAIL WITH PHEASANT SAUSAGE STUFFING

4 servings

STUFFING (SHOWN AT RIGHT)

1½ cups pheasant breast, minced
⅓ cup smoky bacon, minced
¼ cup red onion, minced
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 medium jalapeño pepper, seeded and minced
¼ teaspoon kosher salt
Pinch freshly ground black pepper
¼ teaspoon dried oregano leaves
1 large egg
8 quail
Kosher salt and pepper
8 lemon slices

Chef's Note: “This is a great way to stretch a few upland birds into dinner and makes good use of an older and ‘toothier’ rooster for the stuffing. If you are adept at boning out a quail while keeping the body intact, it will allow for additional stuffing. Semi-boneless quail can also be purchased from Manchester Farms in South Carolina.”

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Season the quail liberally with salt and pepper. In a bowl, combine stuffing ingredients and mix well.



Divide the mixture in half, and then halve again, and then one more time for 8 equal portions. Roll each into a ball and place one inside each quail for roasting.

2. Place stuffed quail, breast side up, on a lightly greased baking sheet and place a lemon slice over each. Roast in the preheated oven for 12 to 15 minutes, or until golden brown. 🍋

Chef Leysath says: “Wild game home cooks routinely go to extraordinary lengths to mask the taste of wild game. They’ve been told that no game shall be prepared without a lengthy soak in some concoction aimed at driving out the evil gamey spirits. After someone recites a recipe, they often end with, ‘It’s so good, it doesn’t even taste like duck,’ which, to me, is not a victory. I can’t say that I blame them. There’s a good chance that they were raised on overcooked wild meats that tasted muttoney, livery, and gamey. If my duck tasted like liver, I’d try to cover it up too!”