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Opening Extract from...

The Claire MacDonald Game Cookbook

Written by Claire MacDonald

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THE CLAIRE MACDONALD GAME COOKBOOK

Photography by Laurie Campbell



For Philipp

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CONTENTS

Introduction	vii
Game Combinations	1
Sauces, Stuffings and Accompaniments	19
Pheasant	37
Grouse	63
Partridge	73
Hare	83
Wild Boar	97
Wild Duck	107
Woodcock and Snipe	117
Venison	123
Index	147



INTRODUCTION

Game, collectively speaking, is delicious. Yet the very word 'game' still strikes feelings of fear and foreboding into the hearts of too many people, for a variety of reasons. Within this book I fervently hope to dispel these misgivings, and to open the world of good eating that's to be discovered when game becomes a regular part of our diet during its autumn and winter season.

This is a practical book. I abide by how I love to eat, and how I live my life – which is also how many others eat and live. I don't have time nor inclination to bone out a bird, for example. You won't find any recipes within this book asking you to do so. I go by the motto that life is too short to stuff a cherry – or to bone a gamebird! Nor will you find any way-out recipes here – there's no Pheasant Vindaloo, for example, or Casseroled Squirrel. But the reasons for just why game is still viewed with suspicion must be addressed. The first common misconception is that game is the prerogative of those who live in rural areas. Yet it is as accessible to those dwelling in the innermost areas of cities, sold through good butchers' shops, and most supermarkets sell several species of game, too. Pheasant is perhaps the easiest to access, because it is by far the most numerous of all the birds shot, and you can

find it sold whole, or the breasts only, or what is described as 'fricassee', which is small chunks of the pheasant trimmings.

A close second misconception, and frequently encountered in mainland Europe too (where game is valued as a food to a far greater extent than it is in Britain), is that all game tastes strong. You can't judge all game this way, because it tastes so different! For instance, the very mildest of game birds are pheasant and red-legged partridge (as opposed to the grey-legged partridge, which for me is the greatest treat). Hanging game, both feathered and furred – and wild salmon too – is essential. How long to hang is weather dependent – for instance, grouse shot on a warm early autumn day will need about five days' hanging, whereas pheasant or any other game bird shot on a cold, frosty day will benefit from up to 10–14 days' hanging, and venison and wild boar can take even longer. But hanging is essential, both for texture and for flavour. Fortunately, however, the fashion for grouse hung for so long that they turned green and dropped from their hooks is over. Well-hung grouse is strong in taste. But it needn't be overpowering, providing that the hanging is for a judicial length of time, not too long.

I have always abided by eating food in its rightful season. This keeps the cook on his or her toes, and it prevents the palate from becoming jaded. Game is the perfect example: it should only ever be eaten in its season, which stretches from 12th August (for grouse) to the end of January. At the back of this book you will find a list of dates for both the feathered and furred game. These dates go back to 1831, when an Act of Parliament was passed to lay down laws necessary for game conservation. Incidentally, I read recently that these dates were lifted during the

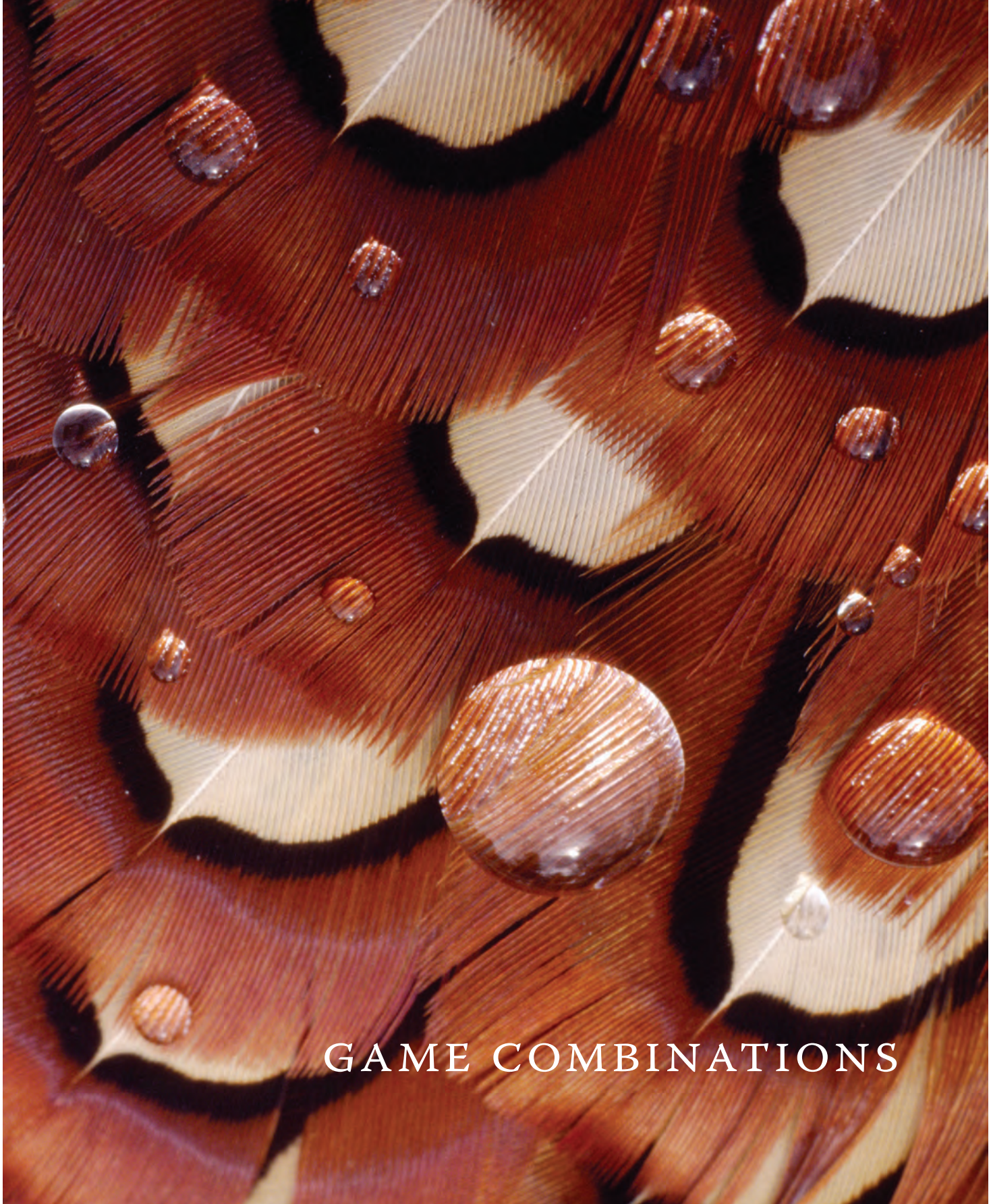
First World War, to enable people to have access to a wider provision of food. I give myself and others a small licence of up to 14 days to use up frozen game birds after the end of January, although I know of one very dear friend who loathes eating pheasant once the season closes, even by one day. Game does freeze, venison as well as any other red meat, but game birds only freeze well for a limited time before deteriorating in both flavour and texture. This applies especially to some types of wild duck which, when frozen, can take on a fishy taste.

Some chapters in this book are short – woodcock and snipe, for example, and wild boar – while the lengthiest chapter is the pheasant recipes. But the first two chapters are slightly different. The first contains recipes using combinations of game. These recipes are so useful because they can be adapted according to what you might have at the time – for example if you buy or are given a hare, and you roast its saddle but have two back legs left over. Or if you buy some old grouse – which is delicious, but needs lengthy cooking. Rabbit (not in itself game but it, like pigeon, combines very well with all types of game), pheasant, and any type of game can be combined together in, for instance, a game pie. Or game soup. Or a game terrine. You don't have to have enough of just one type of game to concoct a hearty, sustaining and delicious game and root vegetable hot pot, nor a game salmis.

There's an all-important chapter on accompaniments for various types of game – some traditional, others less so, but they are included in the chapter because, being the greedy eater that I am, I find their taste and texture combinations with game utterly delicious. I think that accompaniments matter to everything we eat, but to game especially.

As the season wears on game becomes positively economical. Don't let your vision of such culinary bounty be clouded by erroneous visions of landlords, or shooting parties – an outdated notion. If you are swithering, then just think that with the sole exception of pheasant, all other game birds are a vital part of the conservation of our moorlands and woods. And keeping the land is not only a valued form of employment in rural areas, but also an essential part of maintaining the balance of our countryside.

I hope with all my heart that this book proves to be a useful source of recipes as well as giving the nudge needed by some to buy some game, cook it, eat it and see just how delicious it is, as well as being a superb form of nutrition. Versatile and convenient, with game the message above all others is – enjoy!



GAME COMBINATIONS



Game Pie

A good game pie makes the most wonderful dish for a special lunch with family and friends. It ticks all the boxes. It's convenient in that it can be made in its entirety 24 hours ahead, needing only to be baked before serving. And the forcemeat balls (see p.21) can be made, shallow fried and frozen, then thawed and reheated in an ovenproof dish loosely covered with foil, to serve with the game pie.

For game pie I prefer to use puff pastry, and I buy this rather than making my own. But some brands are better than others. If you can't find the excellent Bells brand, then use any other all-butter puff pastry.

Serves 6

1.2 litres / 2½ pints game stock (see recipe on p.5) or shop-bought chicken stock

1 sprig of thyme

1kg / 2¼lb game (e.g. pheasant, old grouse, hare, rabbit) cut into 2cm / 1" chunks and trimmed of any gristle, skin and sinew

2 rounded tbsp flour

1 tsp salt, about 20 grinds black pepper, a grating of nutmeg

4 tbsp olive or rapeseed oil

2 onions, skinned and finely diced (use 3 banana shallots if you prefer a slightly milder taste)

1 fat clove of garlic, skinned and finely diced

150ml / ¼ pint full-bodied red wine – e.g. merlot or sangiovese

1 tbsp Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce*

2 tsp redcurrant or bramble jelly

500g / 1lb puff pastry

1 large egg, beaten well

Put the stock and thyme sprig into a saucepan and bring to simmering point. Simmer with the pan uncovered until the stock has reduced by half.

Meanwhile, mix the salt and pepper and freshly grated nutmeg into the flour, then put this into a large polythene bag. Add the chunks of game meat. Shake the bag vigorously, to coat each chunk of meat in the seasoned flour.

Heat the oil in a large casserole and brown the floured game chunks, a small amount at a time, making sure it is browned on all sides. Scoop the meat into a warm dish, leaving behind as much oil as you can, before adding more game chunks to the casserole.

When all the game is browned, reduce the heat slightly beneath the casserole and fry the diced onions, stirring occasionally, until they are soft and transparent, about 5 minutes.

Scrape the bits off the base of the casserole, and stir in the wine and the reduced stock – fish out the thyme and chuck it in the bin – stirring until the liquid bubbles. Stir in the Worcestershire sauce and the redcurrant or bramble jelly.

* Only Lea & Perrins will do, because it contains the vital ingredient of anchovy, which other makes of Worcestershire sauce omit from their recipes.

When the sauce is simmering, put the browned game back into the casserole, stir it into the sauce, and bring the liquid back to a gentle simmer. Cover the casserole with its lid and cook in a moderate oven (180°C / 350°F / gas 4) for 1 hour.

Take the casserole out of the oven and, when cool, spoon the contents into a pie dish. This can be done up to 48 hours before baking the pie, but be sure to cover the pie dish and its contents with clingfilm and store it in the fridge.

Roll out the puff pastry on a lightly floured board to a size large enough to more than cover the surface of the pie dish. Roll the pastry loosely around your rolling pin when you have finished rolling it out – this makes it is much easier to lay over the surface of the pie filling without tearing the pastry with your fingers.

To complete the pie, take the pie dish from the fridge. Put a couple of eggcups or ceramic pie birds into the contents, pushing them down, to support the pastry. Brush the edges of the dish with beaten egg, then cover the entire dish with the rolled-out puff pastry. Trim it around the edges with a sharp knife, leaving a very small overhang (the pastry will shrink slightly as it cooks).

Shape the edges of the pastry, either by pinching the pastry together at neat, repeated intervals, or, using the blunt edge of the blade of a small knife, at regular intervals and close together cut into the pastry edge.*

Brush the entire surface of the pastry with beaten egg. Slash it evenly in about 8 places to let the steam escape during cooking time. Any leftover pastry can be artistically shaped into leaves or roses – use your imagination! (Or leave it plain: unadorned but golden brown puff pastry looks very good to me.)

Bake the game pie in a hot oven (200°C / 400°F / gas 6) for 20 minutes, then reduce the heat to moderate (180°C / 350°F / gas 4) and cook the pie for a further 20–25 minutes, or until the pastry is well puffed up and deeply golden in colour.

Serve with rowan and apple jelly (see recipe on p.27) handed separately, and with forcemeat balls.

* I once saw a seaside postcard, many years ago, depicting a woman using her set of false teeth to make an intriguing edge to her pie, but I am certainly not advocating that you should try this!



Game Stock

There are only two items to leave out of all stock – and game stock is no exception – and they are turnip and potato. Both these root vegetables turn a stock sour. It is hard to beat good game stock. Make a good batch, 3–4 litres, then simmer the stock to reduce it by half. This intensifies its flavour. But we are all limited in the amount of space we have in our freezers. I have discovered that the most space efficient way to freeze stock is in cylindrical plastic bottles, but the least efficient containers are bowls. ALWAYS label the bottles with the contents and date of making – it is alarming how quickly items take on anonymity once frozen. Start the stock in a large roasting tin, then use your biggest pan or casserole.

4 carcases, from any game bird (if you are using venison too, cut it into large chunks, bones and all)

4 tbsp olive or rapeseed oil

3 onions, quartered, skin and all (the skin gives a rich, dark colour)

1 head of celery, washed, dried and chopped into large chunks

4 carrots, washed, dried and cut into chunks

3 leeks, washed, dried and cut into chunks

2 tsp black peppercorns, crushed in a mortar and pestle

3 juniper berries, crushed with the end of your rolling pin

Pared rind of 1 washed and dried orange (use a sharp potato peeler, to avoid any bitter white pith)

2–3l / 3½–5 pints cold water

Add 2 tsp salt once stock is cooked

Put the game carcases (and venison if using) into the roasting tin with the chopped vegetables, bashed peppercorns and juniper berries, and the olive or rapeseed oil. Mix all together, so that everything has a fine coating of oil, then roast in a hot oven (200°C / 400°F / gas 6) for 40–45 minutes. During this time, open the oven and shake the roasting tin once or twice to move around the contents.

Take the roasting tin out of the oven and pour in the water, then tip the contents into a large pan or casserole. Bring the water in the pan to a simmer, cover the pan and cook, simmering gently, for 2 hours.

Take the pan off the heat, cool the contents, then strain into a smaller pan. Discard the carcases, meat and vegetables. Put the pan on the heat and simmer, the pan uncovered, until reduced by half in quantity. Cool, then pour the concentrated cold stock into containers. Seal, label and freeze.

Game Soup

Serves 6

50g / 2oz butter

2 rashers unsmoked top-quality back bacon, trimmed of fat (easiest done using scissors) then sliced into thin strips

220g / 8oz lamb's liver, trimmed of membranes and chopped

2 medium onions, skinned and finely chopped

1 carrot, peeled and chopped

2 potatoes (approx. 220g / 8oz), peeled and chopped

1 garlic clove, peeled and chopped

1 litre / 2 pints game stock (see recipe on p.5)

150 ml / 1/4 pint port

1 tsp redcurrant jelly

2 strips pared orange rind and 1 strip pared lemon rind (use a sharp potato peeler, to avoid any bitter white pith)

1 rounded tsp salt, about 15 grinds black pepper

1 rounded tbsp finely chopped parsley – to stir through the soup just before serving

Game soup can be positively deadly, but with the unexpected inclusion of a small amount of lamb's liver and using excellent game stock, this version is a winner. But I have always tried to give credit to those who inspire me, and I can't claim that the lamb's liver is my own brilliant discovery: it's not. This ingenious addition is entirely down to one of Britain's best food writers of all time, the late Katie Stewart, whose brilliant recipes are her legacy.

Melt the butter in a large saucepan and fry the strips of bacon and the lamb's liver, stirring, for 2–3 minutes, then scoop them on to a plate. Add the chopped onions and carrots to the pan and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are soft and transparent, about 5 minutes.

Add the chopped potatoes and garlic, stir well, and pour in the stock, port, redcurrant jelly, orange and lemon rinds, salt and black pepper. Stir well and, pan uncovered, bring the liquid to a gentle simmering point. Half-cover the pan with its lid and cook gently for 25–30 minutes, or until the vegetables are tender.

When the soup has cooled, add the fried bacon and liver to the contents of the pan. Liquidise until smooth. Taste and adjust the seasoning if necessary.

Reheat before serving, with the finely chopped parsley stirred through the hot soup just before ladling it into soup plates to serve.



Game Pudding

This is one of the most richly satisfying ways to serve game. Don't for one moment think that the words 'suet crust' indicate imminent death via hardened arteries – these days we can buy reduced-fat suet, which makes a good substitute for the real thing. A steamed suet crust, containing a subtle hint of lemon and thyme, is an unctuous dish. This pudding is greatly enhanced by a green vegetable such as Brussels sprouts or stir-fried cabbage, and also by roast root vegetables, but potatoes are not necessary an accompaniment.

Serves 6

For the suet crust

375g / 12oz self-raising flour

175g / 6oz suet (can be reduced-fat version)

Finely grated rind of 1 lemon

Pinch of dried thyme leaves

1 level tsp salt, about 10 grinds of black pepper

About 150ml / ¼ pint cold water

For the filling

1kg / 2lb assorted game meat – e.g. venison, old grouse, pheasant, hare – cut into equal-sized chunks

2 level tbsp flour mixed with 1 tsp salt and 20 grinds black pepper

2 banana shallots, skinned, halved and finely diced

600ml / 1 pint water/red wine (I make it half and half)

2 tsp redcurrant jelly

For the suet crust

In a bowl mix together the flour, suet, lemon rind, thyme, salt and black pepper, stirring in just enough of the cold water to bind the ingredients together.

On a floured surface roll out two thirds of the dough and line a plastic boilable pudding bowl (1.7 litre / 3 pint capacity) with the suet pastry. The pastry won't fill the bowl to the brim, don't worry.

Roll out the remaining third of the dough in a disc just bigger than the lid of the pudding bowl. Set to one side.

For the filling

Put the game meat into a bowl and add the seasoned flour and the shallots. With your hands, mix it all together thoroughly.

Put the water and red wine into a saucepan and add the redcurrant jelly. Over moderate heat dissolve the jelly in the liquid. Take the pan off the heat and cool.

Pack the seasoned and floured game meat and shallots into the pastry-lined pudding bowl. Pour in the liquid, carefully easing it

amongst the game. Cover the contents with the rolled-out suet pastry disc, and pinch it together with the pastry lining the bowl. Put a disc of baking parchment on top, and snap the lid on to the pudding bowl. Put the pudding bowl into a large saucepan and pour in boiling water, to come halfway up the sides of the bowl. On moderate heat bring the water in the pan to a gentle simmer, cover the pan with its lid, and simmer gently, the water just simmering, for 4½–5 hours. Set your timer and check the water level in the pan regularly, topping it up with boiling water from the kettle whenever it is required. Be vigilant! Nothing is sadder than a game pudding which has been forgotten during its lengthy cooking time, the plastic bowl as one with the base of the pan in which it was cooking. Keep checking the water!

Before serving, have a jug of hot port-flavoured game stock to hand, for pouring into the opened game pudding, because the suet pastry will absorb much of the liquid that was added to the contents of the pudding before cooking. Mix 900ml / 1½ pints reduced game stock with 150ml / ¼ pint port in a saucepan and simmer together for 2–3 minutes, then pour into a Thermos jug. When the pudding is cooked, take the lid off the bowl, throw away the parchment disc, and serve the pudding, pouring over some of the game and port stock.



Game Pasty

A game pasty makes a perfect picnic for a day out hiking during cold winter weeks. These pasties can be made a day in advance, then popped into the oven to bake on the morning of the excursion, and loosely and individually wrapped in greaseproof paper once cooked. If you like, wrap the paper-wrapped pasties in foil, but avoid wrapping the baked hot pasty itself directly in foil: the pastry deteriorates as it cools.

Serves 6

675g / 1½lb shortcrust pastry

1 large egg, beaten

For the filling

675g / 1½lb assorted game meat, trimmed of sinew or membrane

2–3 tbsp olive or rapeseed oil

2 medium onions, skinned and finely diced

2 carrots, peeled and finely diced

1 leek, outer leaves removed, then trimmed and sliced finely

1 fat clove of garlic, skinned and neatly diced

1 rounded tbsp flour

600ml / 1 pint game stock (or good chicken stock)

1 tbsp tomato puree

2 tsp redcurrant jelly

1 tbsp Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce

1 tsp salt, about 15 grinds black pepper

Put the trimmed game meat into a food processor and whiz briefly, to pulverise to the consistency of coarse mince (take care not to make a puree of the meat).

In a casserole heat the olive oil and brown the minced game meat thoroughly, then scoop the browned mixture into a warm dish.

Add the onions, carrots and leek to the casserole and cook, stirring occasionally, for 6–8 minutes. Add the garlic and the browned game meat, mix well, and stir in the flour. Cook for a minute before adding the stock, tomato puree, redcurrant jelly, Worcestershire sauce, salt and black pepper.

Cook until the contents of the casserole reach simmering point, then cover the casserole with its lid and cook in a moderate oven (180°C / 350°F / gas 4) for 1 hour. When the cooking time is up, take the casserole out of the oven and cool the contents.

To make the pasties – and mine are oblong, not traditional pasty shapes (I find it more economical to cut the rolled-out pastry into rectangles rather than circles, and simpler, too!) – roll out the pastry on a lightly floured work surface. You may find it easier to do this in two batches, depending on the size of your surface. Trim the pastry and cut into 6 even-sized rectangles.

Brush the edges of each rectangle with beaten egg. Spoon a sixth of the cooled game mixture on to one side of each rectangle. Fold over the other part of the pastry rectangle and press it firmly on to the egg-washed rim of the filling side. With your two thumbs, pinch together the pastry all around the rim. Put the pasties on a metal baking sheet, then brush each pasty all over with beaten egg. Bake in a hot oven (200°C / 400°F / gas 6) for 15 minutes, then drop the heat to moderate (180°C / 350°F / gas 4) and bake for a further 20–25 minutes. Check the pasties during cooking, and don't let the pastry become too dark in colour.

When cooked, leave the pasties on the baking tray for a minute, then carefully loosen them, using a metal spatula.